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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[1: They're Back?! The Goofy Elf and Dragon Duo!](#)

[2: Every Time I Travel, We Meet Halfway](#)

[3: A Meeting in a Distant Land, Under a Foreign Sky](#)

[4: Demon Slayers](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

1: They're Back?! The Goofy Elf and Dragon Duo!

It all started one ordinary day.

"Fireball!"

Ba-bwoooooosh! The attack spell I unleashed sent the half-dozen bandits around the bonfire flying!

"Wh-What the?!"

"Is it the authorities?!"

"The authorities don't shoot first and ask questions later, stupid! It's gotta be that wretched organism of unparalleled violence—"

"Mega Brand!"

Ka-fwooom! My enraged second wave silenced their nonsense ramblings.

Darn it! I, delicate beauty and master swordsman-slash-sorcerer Lina Inverse, do not deserve to be treated as some unidentified organism! Now I'm really gonna make you pay! Ah, well, might as well hit 'em with a couple more attack spells...

But just as I was thinking that, I detected a hostile presence appear behind me and to the side. I immediately leaped forward when—*Whoooooom!*—a burst of light flared up where I'd been standing.

An attack spell?! I leaped through the grass to get my distance. As I landed, a black-clad sorcerer came out, rustling the leaves. In the dry, scorching air, he and I stared each other down.

Hmm...

"Would you be... a bodyguard hired by the bandits, perhaps?" I asked. It wasn't unusual to see wandering sorcerers who'd fallen on hard times resort to selling their services on the black market.

"And what exactly brings you here? Doing dirty work for the authorities..."

doesn't seem to be your game," he replied. I couldn't make out his face, but his voice made him sound on the older side.

I puffed out my chest. "Heh. Can't you guess? I was feeling bored and restless, so I came to do some bandit busting as a pick-me-up!"

"Who could ever guess that?!" the sorcerer jeered, then flashed an indomitable smile. "Heh... Well, no matter. One way or another, I'm in the service of these men. It's simple bad luck that you would cross paths with me!" He sliced his hands through the air, tracing a pattern while chanting a spell. A blue light raced along the ground, taking the shape of a large inverse pentagram!

"H-Hang on a minute...!" I shouted in surprise.

The sorcerer's mouth curled into another smile. "Come forth! My sworn ally, lesser demon Jaldung!"

Fwsh! The light of the magic circle grew brighter everywhere except the center, where a misshapen figure appeared in the darkness. Those twisted limbs, those dark wings... It was, indeed, a lesser demon.

"No way..." I whispered hoarsely.

Lesser demons are the lowest-ranked members of the demon race. They're far from intelligent, but their magic power and defensive capabilities make them a genuine threat to your standard swordsman or sorcerer. But...

"You used that big ol' magic circle and over-the-top chant... to summon *one* lesser demon?! Haha... bwahahaha!" I couldn't stop myself from cackling.

"What's so funny?!" the sorcerer snapped.

"W-Well... you made such a big deal about it, I just thought it was gonna be something cool!"

"Stop rolling around on the ground laughing! If you don't understand how terrifying a lesser demon can be, then you will die cursing your own ignorance!"

"Raaaaargh!" As if egged on by the magician's anger, the lesser demon howled.

Ah, fine, whatever...

I'd just started chanting up a quick spell when—*Tha-thump*—the world around me... shook? That's the only way I can describe what happened.

Huh...?

"What was that?!" the sorcerer in front of me shouted in sudden panic. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who'd felt it.

Something about the chill of the wind and the smell of the air... There were no visible changes in our surroundings, but I felt a powerful sense that something was *wrong*. The sorcerer and I just stood there for a time, at a loss for words. Finally...

"Graaaaaaaah!" A scream from the lesser demon broke the silence.

A deathly shudder ran through the creature, and—*Bwoosh!*—its back exploded! No, it grew more wings! Suddenly it had two pairs trailing behind it like black rags in the wind.

I had no idea what was going on. And yet... I felt a sudden chill up my spine. In response to this foreboding premonition, I unleashed the spell I'd chanted. "Elemekia Lance!"

My spear of light sailed straight toward the lesser demon, but... *Ziing!* A sound like the creaking of metal sounded out, and a glowing light appeared in front of the demon's chest. In an instant, the light took shape!

An inverted pentagram magic circle?! The spell I'd thrown hit the pentagram and—*Skeeeeen!*—with a hideous squeal, it dispersed! Needless to say, the lesser demon behind it remained unscathed.

"What?!" I found myself crying out.

The spell I'd chosen was one that damaged its target from the astral side. I'd used Elemekia Lance to deal with more than my share of lesser demons, as well as slightly higher-ranking brass demons. But I'd never seen one use a barrier to block a spell. It's not that lesser demons lacked the magic power to do so—they lacked the intelligence.

"What's with this thing?!" I asked no one in particular.

"I... I don't know!" claimed the sorcerer who'd summoned it. "This has never

happened before! But... Ah, no matter! Lesser demon!” he called to it, and the thing turned its eyes toward the sorcerer. The sorcerer then pointed at me. “Kill that woman!”

The lesser demon let out a bestial growl. Instantly, dozens of spears of flame appeared... No, spears of light!

Krababababash! Cutting white streaks in the night, the spears impaled the sorcerer who’d summoned the demon! The sorcerer, still confused about what had happened, collapsed without so much as a scream.

Then, the lesser demon turned its gaze back to me.

I quickly began chanting a spell. Before I could finish, the howling lesser demon summoned more spears of light. It unleashed them—not at me, but slightly to my side. The rain of light pierced the darkness and... *Krrsh!* A sudden flash of silver scattered the bolts. A sword had literally cut through them!

Who was responsible, you ask? Who else?

I didn’t need to see the silhouette briefly illuminated by the light to know the only warrior capable of such a feat was my handsome blond super-swordsman and traveling companion extraordinaire. His brain was as sodden as the fields during the rainy season, and his name was... Gourry Gabriev!

“Graaah!” After tearing through the spears of light, he let out a roar and quickly closed in on the lesser demon. The demon’s four wings flapped as it tried to retreat into the air, but before it could get away, Gourry was up in its face. My boy was as fast as ever!

Slash! There was a glint of his silver blade, and the demon’s rag-like black wings scattered like dead leaves. An instant later, the demon’s body collapsed to the ground, cleaved in two.

“Hey, Lina!” Gourry called with a sigh as he sheathed his sword. “Were you sneaking out at night to bully bandits agai—”

“Save the lecture for later,” I interrupted as I scanned our surroundings with a grave expression.

The bandits had scattered in terror the moment the out-of-control lesser

demon had killed the sorcerer. And now that the lesser demon was dead too, the area seemed free of enemies. That was why Gourry had sheathed his sword. And yet...

“The lesser demon transformed out of nowhere and then killed the sorcerer who summoned it. That shouldn’t be possible. Maybe the sorcerer just didn’t have the correct safeguards in place, but... I dunno. There might be something else going on. We shouldn’t let our guard down.”

“Oh... you think?” Gourry replied, quickly scanning the area around us too.

I already knew good and well there weren’t any hostiles nearby. This was my patented avoid-a-lecture strategy in action! Of course, it only works on the oblivious.

Little did I know at the time that there was far more going on than I could even imagine.

A dark sky. A frozen city. Each breath of the crisp, numbing air seemed to scorch my lungs.

Black-winged figures, too many to count, circled above. Unseasonable snow seemed to absorb all sound and leave things wrapped in empty silence. It was like a monochrome painting or a nightmare described by some mad prophet. But this was neither a painting nor a nightmare—it was reality.

“What... in the world?” I whispered, my voice trembling. I wasn’t sure if it was from the cold or something else.

“It’s not winter yet... Is it?” Gourry, too, whispered dumbfoundedly from where he stood beside me.

It was now the day after my bandit hunt. Gourry and I had left our inn and stumbled across this small town in a mountain pass on our way to the next city. I’d been wondering for a while why it suddenly felt so cold, but when we crested the hill along the main road, this frozen domain ruled by demidemons was the sight that greeted us.

“Let’s go, Gourry!” I said as I took off.

He followed half a step behind me. “Go where?!”

“There are still demons down there! Which means there might still be people alive, right?!”

“Got it!” Gourry responded.

I nodded in response and began to chant. We were still some distance out from the village. If we ran full speed the whole way there, we would’ve wound up too winded to fight by the time we arrived, which would have defeated the whole point of swooping in to help. Instead, I took Gourry’s hand and activated my amplified high-speed flight spell. “Lei Wing!”

Wreathed in a barrier of wind, we shot forward! We were quickly bearing down on the town, but there was still no sign of human life.

Are they hiding in their homes, or are they all...

I shook off that pessimistic thought, and soon enough, Gourry and I arrived. It was truly a city of death. We’d been too far away to see it before, but I now had an up-close view of streets littered with the corpses of slaughtered humans. Their lifeless bodies were partially obscured by the snow piling up on top of them.

It seemed the survivors had fled indoors, because most of the houses were bolted up tight. The only movement we could see was the falling snow and the swarming demons overhead. A few of them took notice of our approach and dove down toward us. They all had the same four-winged silhouette as the demon we’d seen the night before.

“Let’s go, Gourry!”

“Right!”

Gourry drew his sword and I chanted a spell under my breath. There were five or six of the demons headed our way, but I didn’t know how many were out there in total. I could have used a Dragon Slave to blast ’em all in one go, but being in a human settlement limited my options.

A cry from the demons, almost like a raging howl, brought countless arrows of light streaking toward us, vaporizing the falling snow around them as they

went! Their aim was good, which thankfully made them easy to dodge! Gourry and I took off in a dash, flying into a nearby alley.

Ka-bloosh! The arrows of light burst against the ground, letting up a hiss of steam. Some of the pursuing demons landed while others remained airborne, looking down at us in the alley. I took my chance.

“Bram Blazer!”

Whoosh! The blue shock wave I released vanquished several of the demons clustered on the ground. I’d thought they might use defensive barriers like the one the night before, but apparently it was still possible to catch them off guard.

The demons in the air turned their eyes to me. But...

“Graaah!” In that moment Gourry, who had used a series of kicks off the walls of the alley to gain altitude, leaped at the flying demons with a war cry. He sliced through one’s head and then kicked off its back to change direction, slicing through the wings of another. He then did the same to a third on his way back to the ground.

The remaining demons thus shifted their attention to him. When they did, I leaped out of the alley, still chanting a spell.

Gourry effortlessly slew the two demons he’d sent plummeting to the ground, as well as another that had been careless enough to come too close. The lone demon left seemed to realize it was outmatched—or maybe it intended to attack Gourry from above—because it flapped its big wings to get out of sword’s reach and up into the air.

Except that’s when I finished my spell! “Zellas Bullid!”

I fired a beam of light at the demon. *Ziing!* With a metallic growl just like the one from the night before, it conjured a defensive barrier. Too bad Zellas Bullid couldn’t be blocked so easily!

Krash! My beam smashed the barrier apart and kept going, tearing straight through the demon behind it. Its body hit the ground limply, scattering snow everywhere.

Gourry and I had now polished off all the demons that came after us. The only question was how many remained within the town...

“Guess we’ll just have to wander around and beat all of ’em we come across. Let’s get to it!” I was about to take off in a run, but...

“Wait!” Gourry stopped me. He’d sensed it. The presence of... *something*.

I looked around and scanned for it myself. The white streets. The corpses. The only movement, once again, was the indifferently falling flakes.

For a time, all was snow and silence.

“Why don’t you show yourself already?” Gourry abruptly asked in the middle of his vigilant scan. He was staring intently at the roof of a civilian home not too far off. “You’re not just there to watch, are you? If you want to finish things, get out here.”

Shff... At Gourry’s call, a red figure stood up on the rooftop. It then jumped down to the ground below and slowly shuffled toward us. Once the figure was close enough to make out, I felt myself draw instinctively back.

Ewww!

Some time ago, I’d seen an anatomical model in a sorcerers’ council library. That’s exactly what this thing looked like—like a human being with its skin removed. But instead of eyes, it had blood-colored protrusions of flesh that swayed and wobbled like you’d see on a snail or a slug.



Of course, this thing was no ordinary human or monster. It was unmistakably a demon. They were always pretty weird looking, but this one was particularly impressive in the bad taste department.

“Whoever you are... being able to detect me... must mean you’re exceptional.” The creature stopped some distance away from us and spoke to Gourry through a lipless mouth full of exposed teeth.

“It doesn’t matter who we are. Attacking a town to feed on its panic and fear... I know this is basically like an afternoon snack to your kind, but could you stop being such a pain in the neck?” I interjected.

“Ohh...” The interruption seemed to increase the demon’s interest, because his gaze—well, his eye-tentacles—turned to me. “So you know a bit about us, do you? Then you know how formidable a pure demon can be. You seem to have no trivial amount of skill... Care to put it to the test?”

“Pretty sure we don’t have a say in the matter, do we?” I responded.

At this, the muscles at the corners of the demon’s mouth tightened... into a smile. “I’m glad you understand. Now then, let us begin!” he declared as he planted his legs on the ground and readied his fists at his hips.

Just then—*Vrnnnn!*—there came a sound like the buzzing of insect wings, and the snow around the demon began to scatter. The waves of the invisible vibration tore through the snow en route to Gourry! The big lug didn’t try to dodge. Instead, he charged forward!

“Fool!” the demon smirked. But...

“Hahh!” *Vwum!* There was a burst of noise as Gourry’s sword flashed through the air. The snow falling around us had made the otherwise invisible shock wave obvious to the naked eye, allowing him to slice through it with his sword.

“What?!” the demon shouted in surprise, momentarily caught off guard.

Yet it seemed Gourry hadn’t fully been able to dispel the shock wave. He, too, was stopped in his tracks, while I, for one, wasn’t about to let a chance like this slip by! I went to release the spell I’d chanted.

“Dynast—”

But before I could speak the words of power, the demon produced a second shock wave that scattered the snow and cloaked the world around us in white! *A diversion?! Ignoring it, I finished releasing my spell.*

“—Blast!”

Ker-kyewww! The magical lightning coursed ahead, sparkling pale blue beyond the haze of snow before disappearing—but there was no sign it had struck anything.

Just then... I detected a hostile presence appearing behind me!

“Lina!” Gourry quickly moved to cover me, the sword in his hand flashing.

Bwam! Another burst rang out.

The demon had gotten around me and unleashed a third shock wave, which Gourry cut through. Just the reverberations of it were enough to shatter our eardrums. At least, that’s how strong it felt. If I’d taken the hit directly, I would’ve been knocked out in the best-case scenario—and killed instantly in the worst.

“Thanks, Gourry,” I said before beginning my next incantation.

But that’s when I noticed something. The sharp hostility coming from the demon had suddenly vanished. The demon hadn’t disappeared on us, however. Once the billowing snow settled, we could see him standing there some ways off. But he was no longer emitting malice. Instead, he was emitting... uncertainty?

“Lina... Gourry...” The demon whispered as if troubled somehow.

“You recognize our names?” I asked in a challenging tone.

Of course, Gourry and I had fought any number of demons, so it wasn’t unreasonable to think that our reputation preceded us among their kind. But a pure demon like this one didn’t seem like the type to be scared off by rumors.

“Lina... Inverse. Gourry... Gabriev.”

Okay, yeah. It *definitely* knew us.

“You’re pretty interested in our names, huh?” Gourry remarked.

And then, the demon leaped—straight back from us!

“Huh?”

Ignoring my dumbfounded surprise, the demon turned away, leaped up to the nearest rooftop, and then bounded from roof to roof until he disappeared into the falling snow. Just like that.

Soon, I could hear the beating of the wings above us withdraw as well.

Ooooooaaaaaaaaay... So he just up and ran? And politely took the lesser demons with him?

“That was really something, Lina.” After the demons were gone, Gourry sheathed his sword and plonked his hand onto the top of my head. “I thought it was just bandits... but apparently even demons flee at the sound of your name!”

“That’s not what’s going on here, damn it!”

Wham! My killer uppercut laid Gourry sprawled out in the snow.

The tension in town was so thick you could cut it with a knife. I was seeing more soldiers now, and the people coming and going looked frazzled. Of course, this was understandable. It had been about ten days since the night I first witnessed a lesser demon transform into an even more twisted form than usual. Since then, strange weather patterns and demon attacks on cities and villages had only become more frequent.

“Say, Lina...” Gourry and I were walking along the main avenue to find an inn for the night when he spoke up. “Have you ever felt anything like this before?”

“Yeah,” I admitted casually. “A little before the incident in Dils, everywhere had this kind of air to it.”

“Oh, I remember that,” Gourry said, casually hitting a fist into his palm.

Sheesh... Do you really? During said incident, even though he didn’t show himself, a big-name demon—Dynast Graushera—had been pulling the strings. At the time, we saw frequent lesser and brass demon hordes raiding human settlements. We’d managed to sort the whole ordeal out, but the fear it had

instilled was deeply rooted in people's memories, and these incidents were calling it to the forefront of their minds. Could the same thing be happening again?

I was looking around the city and thinking that over when... I found myself taking in a small gasp. *Was that...?! I took off in a run.*

"Huh? Hey, Lina!"

I ignored Gourry and continued running. I peeked into an alley and... *Nobody?*

"What the heck happened?" he asked.

"Ah... Nothing. Just a case of mistaken identity," I said dismissively. "I thought I saw someone I knew."

"Oh?" Gourry accepted my dissembling without much thought.

Really, it *had* to have been a trick of the eye. Plenty of people looked alike, and I'd only caught a glimpse of this person from behind, after all.

"Well, let's find that inn—" I began, but was cut off halfway when a distant scream rang through the city.

Gourry and I shared a brief, silent glance, and then... I looked around and saw a whirl of chaos and screams coming toward us from down the avenue.

"The demons! The demons are attacking!" I could hear voices shouting in between all the screaming.

Gourry and I both took off in a run toward the pandemonium. We pushed our way through the rushing, fleeing crowd that steadily thinned the closer we got to the origin of the chaos. We pressed on until, in the middle of the road, we found...

A demidemon corpse?

I wondered if the local guard had defeated it, but there was no sign of fallen guardsmen anywhere nearby. Lesser and brass demons were basically cannon fodder to me and Gourry, but they were fearsome foes against your standard-issue swordsmen and sorcerers. Sorry to say it, but there was no way the town guard could take one out unscathed. *So whoever killed it must have been...*

“Lina! Incoming!” Gourry’s cry interrupted my train of thought.

I looked up to see about four airborne demons coming toward us. Gourry drew his sword, and I began chanting.

“Graaah!” With the demons’ cry, a mass of rays of light flickered and manifested.

Or, at least, the mass was about to manifest until—*Bababababwoosh!*—a dozen spheres of light appeared from out of nowhere, hit the demons in midair, and pulverized them.

That attack...!

“It’s not safe here!” the caster called from around a nearby building before turning the corner. “Get to a safe...” he began, then trailed off as he saw me and Gourry.

He recognized us—and I recognized him too. He was a handsome blond who looked to be middle-aged, wearing light leather mail over his blue clothing. But this wasn’t his true form. He actually hailed from Dragons’ Peak near the Kataart Mountains where the demons lived. His name was Milgazia, and he was really a golden dragon elder who occasionally used transformation magic to take human form like this.

“Aren’t you—”

“Milgazia. It’s Milgazia. Call me by my name, human,” Milgazia said, bearing down on him so quickly there was no time for Gourry to finish whatever he was about to say.

“Ah... right,” Gourry replied, abashed.

Huh. Guess he’s still touchy about Gourry calling him a big lizard before, even if he didn’t mean any harm.

“It’s been a while—or perhaps not for you humans. Still, it seems you didn’t need my help.”

“Master Milgazia! What are you doing in this— Actually, now’s not the time for pleasantries! Let’s finish off these demons!”

“Worry not. I’m not here alone. *She’ll* handle the low-level demons.”

Wait, what...? I could feel the blood drain from my face when I heard that.

“What’s wrong? You’re looking rather ill,” Milgazia asked.

“Er, when you say *‘she,’* do you mean that you’re here with...”

I looked over and saw for myself. *Fwee! Kabwoom!* A bright white light demolished several demons and the buildings surrounding them.

Milgazia and I stood there in silence.

“Say... isn’t that kind of a problem?” Gourry whispered.

Milgazia had no response, and as I watched the indiscriminate beams of light fire this way and that... I just felt tired.

Ahh, that stupid elf is at it again, I lamented to myself.

The demons were vanquished in no time, but the damage to the town was severe. As for the primary cause of the damage... Just don’t ask, okay? Please?

“But why do we have to go to a different city? The citizens should be grateful for our aid!”

“Take a hint, will you?!”

Wham! Without any hesitation, second thoughts, or reservations, I slapped her on the back of the head with my slipper. And who was this slappee, you may ask? None other than a beautiful blonde in white armor—a picky, selfish, and thoughtless elf! Yup, it was Memphys Rhinesword, whom we’d previously met through Milgazia.

“You were dishing out laser breath like it was going out of style! You did more damage to the city than the demons did! There’s no way we could stick around after that!”

After we defeated the demons, me, Gourry, Milgazia, and Memphys—Mephy, rather—had booked it out of the city on the road to the next town over.

“I made sure there weren’t humans in the buildings before I fired!” she barked.

“That doesn’t make it okay!” I barked back.

Er... Okay, so maybe I'm guilty of that behavior myself from time to time. But anyway!

"Discounting whatever gratitude they might feel for us saving them, at least one person was bound to come asking us for restitution. Did you really want to stick around to do some carpentry, Mephy?" I threw at her.

"Er, I suppose not..." she muttered. "R-Regardless, why on earth are you carrying a slipper?! Humans make no sense to me."

"Because it's convenient to have one around!" I declared with total confidence.

Mephy froze up for a moment... then clapped her hands, exchanged a glance with Milgazia, and said, "I see! That is indeed very convenient, Uncle Milgazia."

"Yes... We should try it as well."

"Humans do have good ideas now and again."

Um, why are you so impressed by that? I mean, I know I'm no prize, but... dragons and elves really make no sense. Still, I dismissed the thought. I didn't want to waste too much time imagining what a dragon or elf would find convenient about a slipper you could pull out whenever you wanted.

"So, uh, all that aside..." I started, snapping out of my momentary reflection on their strange admiration of my habits. "If you're back in human territory, does that mean the demons are spawning again?"

"Yes," Milgazia answered with a serious expression (granted, his expression was always serious). "When we halted the previous scheme of Dynast Graushera, he claimed that the mass demon spawnings were merely part of a feeding frenzy, but I'm not certain I entirely believe that."

"You mean..."

Milgazia nodded firmly. "It's still possible that the demons are striving for a repeat of the Incarnation War. Either way, just because the abnormal spawnings don't directly affect the dragons and elves doesn't mean we can simply sit back and watch."

"I'm happy to hear that. But the strange irregularities in the weather started

happening right around the same time this new wave of spawnings kicked off. Do you think they're connected?"

"To be honest, I can't say. I can't imagine demons affecting the weather."

"They shouldn't have that much power, you mean?"

"Well, when Flare Dragon Ceifeed fought Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, it's said that half of the continent known as the Sleeping Dragon was vaporized. That could just be a legend, of course, but a strong enough demon could certainly have the power to affect the weather in parts... But it would require a truly massive expenditure of power, and it's difficult to imagine why they would bother."

"I see..."

"That reminds me, Uncle Milgazia. The city we passed through two days ago was unusually warm. No sign of demons, though," Mephy put in.

"It was warm?" I found myself scowling. "The city Gourry and I stopped in ten days ago was super cold."

"Oh? Are you sure you're just not merely sensitive to the cold?"

"Heck no! It was so cold that... uh... If the comedic chill factor of one of Milgazia's jokes is about sixty, then..."

"Wait a moment, human," Milgazia objected, but I kept on.

"The cold there was... about a 2.7."

"A decimal point?!"

"Wait! What are you implying, human?!"

"I'm not implying anything. I said just what I meant!"

"What?!" The golden dragon elder looked severely shaken. "Are you suggesting... my jokes aren't funny?"

"I wouldn't say they're *unfunny* per se... It's more like they're weapons of mass psychological destruction. Oh, and for reference, anything over a five on my comedic chill factor scale would indicate lethality to living beings."

"My jokes are lethal?! Erk..." Milgazia clenched his fists. "So the days I was known as 'Merry Master Mil' are over..."

When would those days have been, exactly...?

As Milgazia sagged in depression, Mephy grabbed his shoulders. "That's not true, Uncle Milgazia! Your jokes are always very funny! Perhaps they're simply too highbrow for these unrefined humans and their short life spans! Just remembering number eighteen, the one about the chicken and the road..." There, she burst into an uncontrollable gigglefit.

Sorry to interrupt your fond little memory, but I can smell how awful that joke is from here! I guess I really just don't get dragons and elves...

"Yes, that's right! I do have that joke!" Milgazia looked cheered up again (don't ask me why) and pointed in my direction. "Now, listen, human! Prepare yourself for the greatest joke in my repertoire!"

"Wait a minute, Master Milgazia! We've gotten off topic here!" I tried quickly to get us back on track, figuring that hearing any joke that Milgazia and Mephy declared "the greatest in his repertoire" would turn me into a vegetable. And don't you dare mention that I brought this on myself! "We were speculating about what the demons are after! Do you have any idea at all what's going on or where we should go next? If not, we're pretty much walking blind right now."

"True... That is an issue," Milgazia agreed.

Yes! Certain doom avoided!

"It's clear that something is afoot," he continued. "And it could mean the involvement of a high-ranked demon, as it did during the Dynast Graushera incident. But if they're hiding their presence, there won't be any way for us to detect it. Mephy and I have returned to human territory to lend a hand, but our greater goal is to unearth the cause of all this."

"Hmm, I see. But it's not like we can just ask the demons what's up, and wandering around aimlessly isn't gonna do us much good."

"True. But if we can't find a way to search for clues..."

"I guess there's just one thing to do!" I proclaimed.

"Oh? What is that?" Milgazia asked.

In response, I declared knowingly, "We forget all about it and live our lives to

the fullest!”

Mephy and Milgazia both simultaneously criticized my fabulous suggestion.

“What’s wrong with you?!” she shrieked.

“That won’t solve anything, human,” he said flat-out.

“That was a joke... Although there genuinely doesn’t seem to be much else we *can* do,” I said.

“Indeed...”

“That much is true.”

“Hey, c’mon! No worries there, guys.” This cheerful voice interrupting our hard thinking session came from our remaining team member, Gourry.

“What do you mean, ‘no worries there’?”

“Look at who we’ve got with us. The trouble will find us sooner or later. It always does.”

“You shut up! You might be right, but that is *not* something to be proud of!” I shouted with my whole heart, letting my cry echo through the empty city streets.

Don’t take this as a brag, but I’m pretty wise to ambushes. Even by demons. Sometimes on an abandoned road, I’ll sense a hostile air from the brush and pick up on their presence. Or I’ll be in a room at my inn and find myself awakened by an uneasy feeling just in time to sense someone approaching my window from outside.

But I gotta say... A demon just barging into a crowded eatery in broad daylight? That was a first for me.

For a split second, nobody paid it any mind. The door opened with a jingle, and the thing walked in like it was nothing. If I had to describe it, it was like a dead tree in the shape of a human. If it had just had empty holes where its eyes and mouth should be, it would’ve been rather cartoonish. But in place of a mouth, it had one abnormally large bloodshot eye that restlessly scanned the room. The creature casually entered the restaurant and began looking around

as if meeting up with someone.

I'm not sure who really noticed it first, but... As odd as this sounds, it felt like a spreading wave of hush came naturally over the clamoring inn until, at last, silence reigned.

Gourry and I were sitting at a table in the corner with Mephy and Milgazia. We were in the middle of our meal and froze up for a second before we realized what was going on. The demon made its move a split second before we could snap back to our senses and act.

Wuum! Its arms, which looked like dead branches, tore through the air. The closest customers reeled back, spewing blood as they collapsed.

Screams followed, filling the restaurant instantly. The patrons, descending into a panic, ran wildly back and forth with no clear goal in mind. Gourry and I approached the demon through the teeming crowd, but the restaurant was so chaotic now that we couldn't use long-range attacks like magic for fear of hurting people. That meant this fight was down to steel!

The demon noticed Gourry a mere moment before he reached it. It raised an arm and its fingers elongated, extending toward him! Of course, such a straightforward attack would never work on the big lug. He dodged through the fingers, slicing them off as he went. The demon closed in, and...

Slash! A flash of silver sliced it through on the diagonal.

"Be careful, Gourry!" I screamed. "That was too easy!"

"Got it!" Gourry responded, and just then...

The fingers of the demon, which had speared the floor after being shorn off, began to swell and reconstituted into another dead tree demon.

Is that its main body, then?!

Gourry sensed it and turned toward the reconstituted demon, but just then, an identical demon grew out of the roots of the fallen monster!

Is this one a composite like the Red and Gray demons we fought once before?!

The panicking crowd of people continued to make it impossible for me, Milgazia, and Mephy to get into position to support Gourry. The two identical

demons turned their fingers into arrows and launched them at the big lug. He readied his sword to block, and...

Fwoosh! Before he could swing his sword through the air, the incoming swarm of woody bolts let out a sound like an explosion, burst, and fell futilely to the floor.

“This... is...” The dead tree demon eked out a few strange-sounding words and turned around.

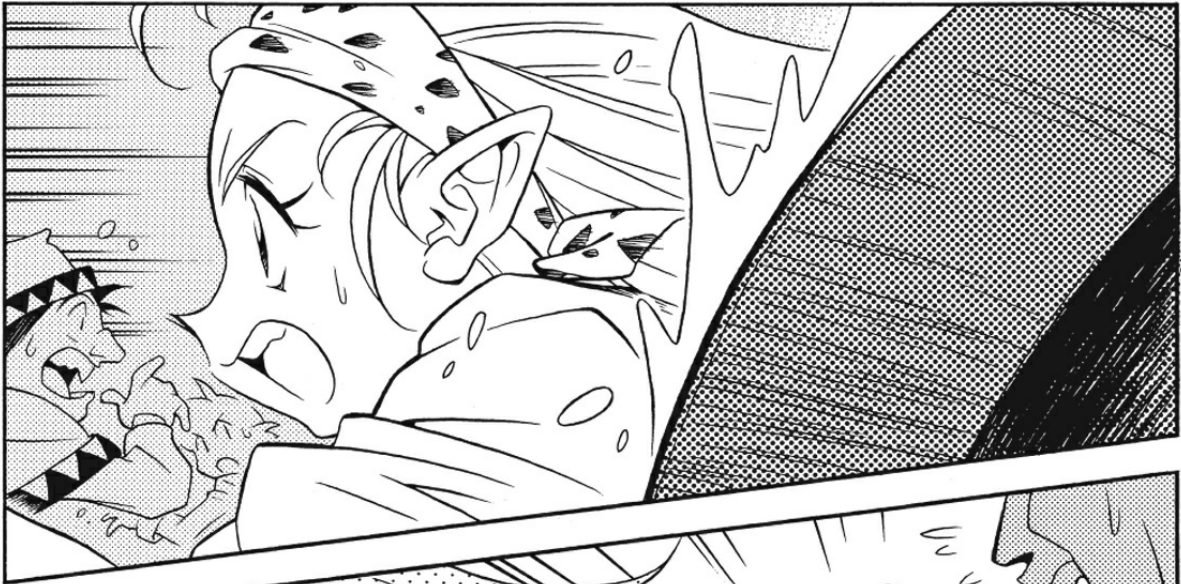
Bwuh?! I turned my gaze in the same direction and found myself drawing back—for standing at the center of the chaotic crowd of people was the slug-eyed demon we’d encountered in that frozen town.

This guy again?! When the heck did he... Of course, his appearance added to the panic. *But if we didn’t notice his arrival, that means...*

I diagnosed the reason quickly enough: there was no hostility emanating from him. And, in fact... Given the tree demon’s reaction, the anatomical model demon might have even been the one to stop its attack.

But why? Bah, think about it later! For now, first enemies first!

Of course, there were still people screaming and running all around us.



Crack!

“Gwuh!”

Fwup!

“Hrrk!”

Smack!

“Geh!”

“Wh-What are you doing, human girl?!” Milgazia asked from across the crowd.

“Knock-out chops,” I replied simply. “If things won’t calm down, I need to calm them down myself—even if it means getting a little violent! They’re all gonna die if I don’t!”

“That’s very true.”

“I don’t need *you* backing me up, Miss Collateral Damage!”

I don’t know if she didn’t hear me or she just ignored me, but—*Bwom!*—the white wings of Mephy’s armor opened explosively. The patrons they hit went flying and fell unconscious.

“What do you think you’re doing, Miss Friendly Fire?!”

“The same thing you are!”

“It’s okay if *I* do it!”

“It is not! More importantly, we should have an easier time getting around now!”

“Fair enough!”

Girl had a point. The panic had died down in Mephy’s wake. Of course... the people now huddled in a corner of the eatery were looking at us like we were bad guys too. But I’m sure that was just my imagination! (Totally!)

Now that we could offer support, I began to chant a spell. But before I could finish it, the dead tree demon farther back extended its fingers. It was aiming... not at Gourry, but at the ceiling! When it struck, it used its arm like a fulcrum to

whip around, carry itself past Gourry, and reunite with the other dead tree demon. Feet together and hand in hand...

Creeeak...

With a sound just like a tree bending in the wind, the two demons melted into each other's bodies and were joined again in an instant. Then, without hesitation, the newly formed creature spun around and ran out of the eatery. After watching it go, the anatomical model demon sank into the floor and disappeared.

"Tch!" Gourry tutted and flew out the door. I quickly followed.

At such times it could be dangerous to pursue, but there were people outside the shop. The commotion might have even drawn a crowd. If the demon ran out into that, there would be a bloodbath.

I opened the door, and... *Crash!*

"Gweh?!"

I smacked right into Gourry, who had stopped just outside. And let me tell you, bashing face-first into someone's breastplate? Kinda painful!

"Hey, Gourry! What are you—" I started. Then I stopped.

Just as I had expected, there were quite a few rubberneckers gathered around the inn. They stared at me and Gourry, their curious gazes silently seeming to ask what in the world was happening inside.

In other words... none of them had seen a demon rushing out of the restaurant. If they had, they would've been freaking out.

When I stopped to think about it, there had been no indication of panic from outside when the demon first entered the eatery. And a creepy thing like that brazenly walking down the main drag *definitely* would have caused a scene. That suggested it had appeared from the door itself—and disappeared the same way. Effectively, it had just teleported off.

"Um... er..." Gourry, who clearly hadn't picked up on this, spoke up rather awkwardly. "Say... did a guy who looked like a dead tree walk out of here?"

This seemingly ridiculous question was met with silence.

C'mon, dude. Do you hear yourself? You sound a little nuts to anyone who doesn't know about demons, okay?

"Um, did you see anyone suspicious come out before us?" I joined in, attempting the impossible feat of covering for Gourry's stupidity.

"The only suspicious person here is that guy..."

That operative word of my question launched the rubberneckers into all sorts of speculation.

"Why is he carrying a sword?"

"What happened in there? A brawl? A robbery?"

"How do we know *you* didn't start the fight?"

"It's been handled!" I shouted, overpowering the chatter from the gawking crowd. They quieted down for a moment, and I took that opportunity to scan over the group as I continued, "Of course, I doubt you'll believe anything sword-toting strangers have to say, but you can get the details from the shop's owner later."

Either accepting what I said or losing interest, the crowd began to break up as people went back to their business. But...

"?!"

Toward the outer ring of the crowd, I caught a glimpse of chestnut hair. Its owner stopped for just a moment... and glanced back over her pauldron at me. I saw only her profile, and truly only for an instant. With another rustle of her long hair, she then disappeared into the crowd.

Unconsciously, I found myself chanting. "Lei Wing!" Using an amplified high-speed flight spell, I sailed right over the other rubberneckers.

I quickly scanned the area and spotted her some ways away. Just as I began to weave my way toward her, she turned the corner and disappeared into an alleyway. I arrived a moment later and looked down the alley... There were people there, but not the person I was looking for.

"Hey, Lina!" I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Gourry, who'd just caught up with me. "What gives?"

“I saw a familiar face.”

“Hmm... I feel like we had this conversation not long ago...”

“We did,” I admitted readily.

“Then your buddy’s still gotta be nearby, right? Let’s search for them together. What do they look like?”

“A beautiful girl around eighteen or nineteen years old. Relatively short. Long, chestnut hair. Wearing a black bandanna, pauldrons, and a sorcerer’s cape.”

“So she kinda looks like you? The ‘beautiful’ and ‘*relatively* short’ parts aside, I mean.”

“No,” I said, also readily enough, while giving Gourry a kick for good measure. “She doesn’t *kinda* look like me. She looks *exactly* like me.”

2: Every Time I Travel, We Meet Halfway

“A doppelgänger, eh?” Milgazia whispered with his usual stoic expression after I explained what I’d seen.

“Doppelgänger” was a word referring to the phenomenon of briefly glimpsing a double of oneself out of the corner of one’s eye, or to the double itself. Assuming the situation wasn’t some kind of heartwarming “identical twins separated at birth” deal, anyway. Some people believed the doppelgänger was a premonition of imminent death. Others thought it was some kind of shape-shifting monster. And others yet classified it as a mere figment of the imagination. Nobody really knew the truth.

The four of us—me, Gourry, Milgazia, and Mephy—were discussing the possibilities as we wandered the main avenue. It was no surprise that the local guard had come running after all the hubbub, but the incident was pretty clear-cut. We told them that Gourry had slain an attacking demon, and that was that. They had no reason to think we bore any responsibility. Fortunately, despite the other patrons’ injuries, there had been no fatalities. *Unfortunately*, the damage to the eatery was bad enough that we couldn’t even sit and have a calm conversation there, let alone finish our meal. Hence the decision to leave.

“While we’re on the subject, what do dragons and elves say about doppelgängers?” I asked.

“We tend to think they’re false reports or mistaken identity,” Milgazia said easily. “I’ve never heard of a dragon or elf experiencing a doppelgänger phenomenon, but we know that they occur in human societies. We believe them to be rumors stemming from differences in cultural spheres—that is, false reports—or cases of mistaken identity based on superficial resemblances.”

“So you don’t think they’re real?”

“It could be mistaken identity in your case too. Perhaps this other person simply looked a lot like you,” Mephy suggested.

“No way.” I shook my head. “There are lots of people out there, so yeah, everyone’s got a look-alike or two. But wearing the exact same bandanna and pauldrons?”

“Then...” Mephy said, looking to Gourry next. “Did *you* see this person? Her so-called doppelgänger?”

“No, I didn’t,” he replied flatly.

“Weeeeeell?” Mephy puffed out her chest as she gave me serious side-eye. “Are you *positive* you weren’t just seeing things?”

Oof, that one stung... Fortunately, someone unexpected threw me a lifeline.

“We can’t say for certain, Mephy.”

“What do you mean, Uncle Milgazia?”

“Don’t you remember the incident in Dils? Dynast assumed the king’s appearance—so closely that not even those who knew him well could tell the difference.”

“Then you think this other ‘me’ is—”

“It’s possible. It could also be mistaken identity, as Mephy suggested. And even if it is a demon disguised as you, we don’t know their objective.”

“That’s true, but...”

“Either way, we should find a place to sit down,” Gourry jumped in. “We can’t just walk around all day, can we?”

“Yeah, good point.” I nodded in agreement. That demon had interrupted our lunch, after all, so I looked around to find another eatery nearby. “Well, we could all go in there.”

“Uncle and I don’t particularly require—” Mephy tried to object, but I interrupted her.

“C’mon, humor us. Besides, we need a more private place to talk.” I proceeded to half-drag them inside and pick a random table.

“You said we need a private place to talk,” Milgazia said once we sat down. “But I don’t see how further discussion of the matter will be of use.”

“Guh!” He kinda had me there.

“Indeed, I think she just wants to eat. Humans, honestly...” Mephy muttered.

“Sh-Shut up! I can’t control when I get hungry!”

As we were talking, a waitress came by. “Oh? I thought you were leaving,” she said.

...

“Miss?” she prompted me.

“Huh?” I honked stupidly. The waitress seemed to be addressing me... but I was pretty sure I’d never been to this particular eatery before. “Me?” I asked at length, pointing to myself.

She nodded. “Well, of course you. Ah, I see. Did you forget the directions I gave you? I’ll try not to overwhelm you with village names this time. How’s this? Leave the city from the north entrance and follow the road a little ways. When you reach the big fork in the road, go west... or rather, left, and you’ll reach a city called Atlas. From there, head northwest to—”

“W-Wait a minute!” I quickly put the brakes on her direction-giving.

She blinked in confusion at first, then said, “Oh... Of course. It really is too much to remember, isn’t it? How’s this, then? Leave the city from the north. When the road splits, take the left fork. Then follow that until you reach Atlas City. Once you get there, ask someone else—”

“I said wait! What are you even talking about?!”

“Why, the way to Sairaag City, of course. You asked me about it when you were here before.”

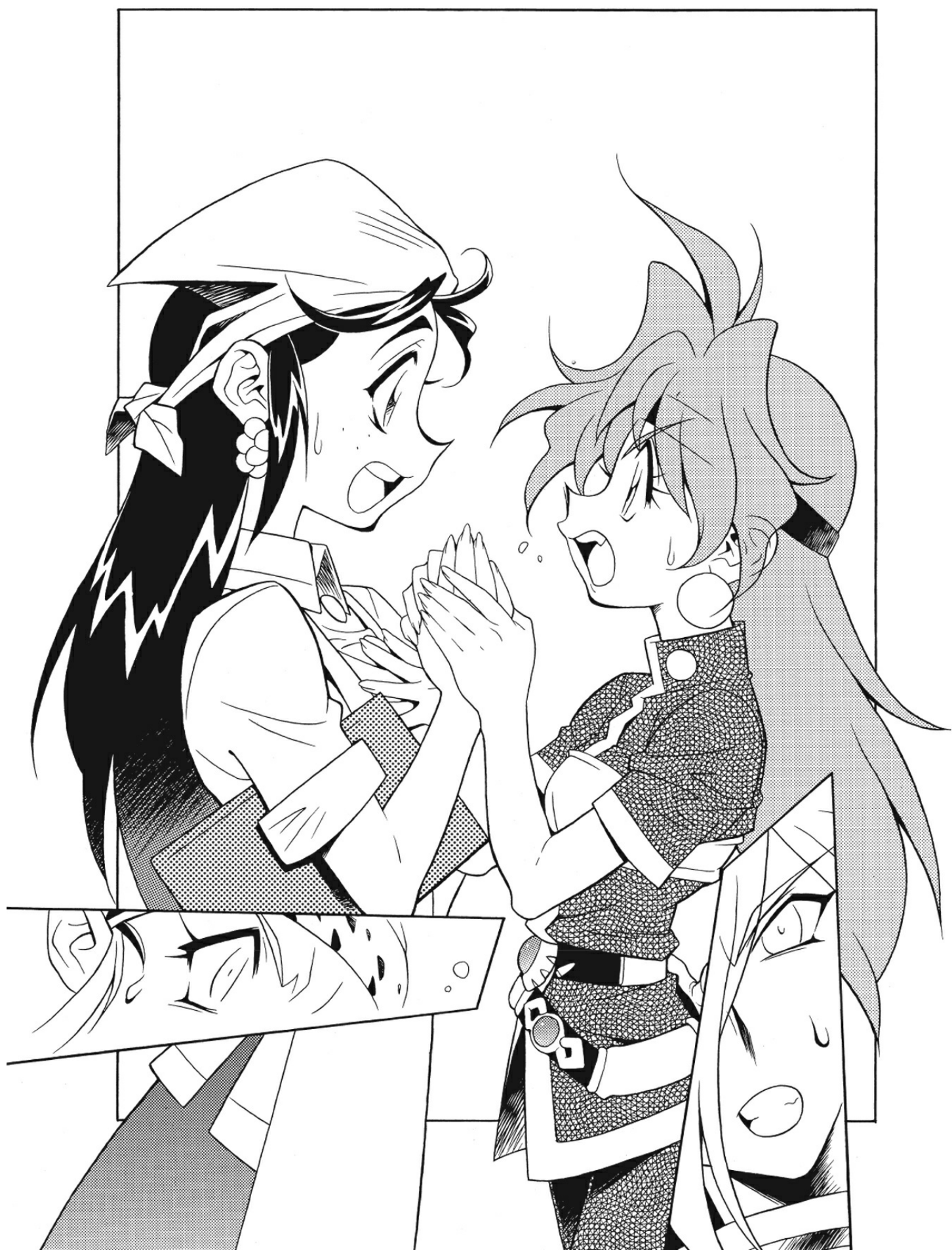
“Huh?” I bleated again. When I was here? The way to Sairaag? I already knew how to get to Sairaag, and, sorry to repeat myself, but I’d never been to this—

Hang on!

“Hey!” I stood up with a clatter and seized the waitress’s hand. “I think that was my twin sister! We were separated at birth!”

“Huh?!” My words caused not just the waitress, but also Gourry and Mephy,

to gasp in surprise.



“I’ve been searching for her for years! To think I’d finally find her here... You say you saw someone who looked *just like me*?!”

“Er, yes. Are you... certain that wasn’t you? She was dressed just like you...”

“How long ago was it? How did she seem? She asked how to get to Sairaag, right?”

“You just missed her... Well, not quite *just*, but it hasn’t been long. It was around noon or so. And as for how she seemed... Calm, I’d say. She had a light meal, then asked how to get to Sairaag. She sounded like she wanted to leave as soon as possible.”

“I see...” I nodded and sat down again. “Anyway, we’d like to order some food!”

“What?! You’re not going after your sister? You could still catch her in town if you left now!”

“Nah, it’s fine. Uh, I mean, now that I know where she’s going, I can take my time. Rushing things would only cheapen the reunion. Now, about my order...”

“Er... Yes, of course.” The waitress looked a bit unsatisfied, but took our orders and withdrew into the back. While we were waiting...

“L-Lina... you have a twin sister?!”

“Don’t you go believing that stupid story, Gourry!”

“You mean you were lying?!” asked Milgazia, who had also apparently believed it. He’d remained stone-faced the whole time, so I’d assumed he was onto me.

“I had to say that to get her to drop it, okay? But this proves it! There’s someone in town who looks just like me!”

“You’re not playing some elaborate joke on us? You *were* the one who picked this place...” Mephy suggested.

But it was Gourry who allayed her suspicions. “There’s no way. That lady said she was calm. And that she ate a *light* meal. Neither sounds much like Lina, huh?”

“Very true.”

“Agreed.”

“Hang on, you guys. What exactly are you— Okay, I won’t ask what you’re implying, because I know you’ll just say ‘exactly what it sounds like,’ so I’m actually going to drop it. Moving on! I think we can all agree now that I’ve got a double around here, yes?”

“Even so, it’s an incredible coincidence that she happened to stop here...”

“I don’t think it *is* a coincidence,” I continued. “We can investigate after we eat, but say my double went around to *every* eatery in the area to ask the way to Sairaag. It’s pretty darn likely I’d end up hearing about it eventually, right? And I’ll bet they did something similar in the city where we ran into you guys, but the indiscriminate destruction wrought by a certain elf I won’t name forced us to skip town in a hurry—”

“Excuse me! I object to that phrasing!”

“So the question is... Who did it, and why?”

“Don’t just ignore me!”

“The answer is simple. This is an invitation from the demons—to Sairaag City.”

At that, Mephy fell silent.

“True... That does seem to be the most logical conclusion,” Milgazia whispered, waiting until the waitress served a salad and left. “But then what’s going on in Sairaag?”

The best way I can think of to describe Sairaag City is to say that it was fighting Gyria City for the title of “world’s unluckiest town.” About a hundred years ago, it had been torched by the demon beast Zanaffar, a mutant version of a kind of living magical armor that humans had carelessly tried to replicate. Then after finally crawling its way back to life, the city was destroyed *again* two years ago by a wannabe sage gone mad. Then Hellmaster set up a home base in the ruins, and the Lord of Nightmares paid a little visit, and...

Okay, I take it back. Gyria had nothing on Sairaag. Gyria has seen its share of court intrigue, but the city itself had only burned down *once*. I mean, not that

anyone's keeping score, but that was small potatoes by comparison!

And on top of all that, it now smelled like the demons were plotting something new in Sairaag. The place was basically an ongoing misfortune expo. Seriously, word to the wise for anyone who might think about living there? Don't.

Now, Sairaag's woebegone backstory aside...

"The city's gotta be rife with negative energy after everything it's been through. Maybe the demons find it easy to use," I proposed, reaching for my veggies.

"That is possible," Milgazia agreed stoically. "We're aware that a number of terrible tragedies have befallen the city recently. I've always wondered what the cause could be."

Erk. Well, other than the Zanaffar thing a century ago, all of said tragedies had involved me and Gourry... but I wasn't sure I wanted to bring that up. I mean, it's not like they were our fault! The wannabe sage and the nasty demon dudes started it all! Gourry and I were victims!

"Th-The question remains, what do the demons want?" I said, swallowing my lettuce and trying to change the subject.

But Milgazia continued to peer at me, stone-faced. "We'll find that out when we get there."

"Yeah, maybe, but... Hey, hang on a minute! You make it sound like we're definitely going!"

"What?!" Milgazia's eyebrow inched upward. "Don't tell me you *don't* intend to go, human girl!"

"You bet your butt I don't! This is an obvious trap, with no incentive to walk into it to boot! Why should I go just because they want me to, huh?!" I said, swishing my knife around for emphasis.

But Milgazia was persistent. "Is that so? Can you really be certain that this is wholly unrelated to the incident in the restaurant earlier?"

"Huh?"

“The attack from the demon resembling a dead tree. Perhaps it was mere coincidence that it happened to join us at that restaurant... But the second demon that appeared demonstrated curious behavior as well. It seemed as though it was trying to thwart the dead tree demon. They weren’t allies, but they also weren’t enemies. If they were, then rather than simply interfering, the red demon would have attacked the dead tree demon. But the red demon certainly wasn’t there to protect the people in general either. It was more like...” He cast a glance in Gourry’s direction. “Like it was there to protect *him*.”

“Yeah... I read no hostility from him at all,” Gourry mused, pushing his green pepper rings to the side of his plate before wrapping some chopped sausage in lettuce and sticking it in his mouth.

“One demon attacked you. One demon protected you. And now demons are attempting to lure you to Sairaag... Yet you truly believe it’s all unconnected?”

“W-Well, when you put it that way... Yeah, I guess not.”

“If these two situations are related, then forgoing a visit to Sairaag may incite the demons to attempt a more coercive invitation. Moreover, with this information in mind, Mephy and I will be going to Sairaag ourselves. I suspect there’s a connection between this and the recent mass demon spawnings, and while there’s no guarantee that we’ll learn what we need to know in Sairaag, it’s our only lead. Will you go with us, even knowing it’s a trap? Or will you part ways with us here and follow your own path? If you choose the latter, be aware that the demons will likely invent a reason to make you go. The simplest route would be to take a hostage, which would put you at a greater disadvantage with no real upside. I think, then, that you’d agree there’s only one reasonable choice.”

“Umm. Nghmmm...” I shoveled some salad into my mouth while I mulled that one over.

The dragon elder had a point. Hellmaster had done exactly that before, in fact, when he kidnapped Gourry to force my hand. If I decided out of stubbornness not to go to Sairaag, the demons might get angry enough to try something similar. I didn’t want to deal with that again. Besides, there was one benefit to taking the initiative and going to Sairaag now—we’d have Milgazia

and Mephy.

I'd first caught sight of my double before we ran into them, see, and the demon that had attacked us at the eatery hadn't had a human form... suggesting it wasn't particularly powerful as pure demons went. It stood to reason that the demons weren't any the wiser about Milgazia and Mephy. If they knew what they were up against, they would've sent someone a little more powerful. They'd catch on eventually, but for now, this arrangement was quite advantageous for us.

So, like Milgazia said, the choice was obvious. I sighed. "Fine, I'll go. Just get off my back already..." I said with an air of annoyance as I stuck my knife into my ground sausage.

The strange weather phenomena gradually seemed to be dying down. The demonic activity, however... Far from lessening, it was getting worse by the day. We'd had a few run-ins with demidemons on the road already.

In towns along the way, we heard rumors of other countries getting serious in their response to the threat. Some said the Elemekia Empire was sending out their Gungnir Knights to slay demons. Others said Saillune was forming a hunting party led by a woman of the royal family. Some people even said that Zephilia was dispatching the Eternal Queen's special forces and the Knight of Ceifeed.

Though if the Knight of Ceifeed really is taking action, this is probably well in hand without me doing anything... Unfortunately, we had no way of knowing if any of it was true. Talk is cheap, after all.

So, setting all that aside, we eventually ended up in Atlas City.

"Doesn't this place seem... a little less populated than the last time we were here?" Gourry asked, craning his neck in every direction.

"It does," I replied casually enough. After all, there had been attacks in this part of the world too. "You saw it when we came in, right? Part of the outer wall was wrecked. And people were talking in the village we left this morning about demons hitting Atlas City not too long ago."

Gourry thought for a minute, then said, “Oh! I do remember hearing that.”

“Wow, you remembered something for once?”

“It was when I accidentally put a piece of green pepper in my mouth.”

So that’s what made it stick, huh?

Thankfully, the damage to the city had been minimal, but it was clear from the vibe in town that the attack had put the locals on edge.

Gourry and I had been to Atlas before, and during our last visit, the streets had been packed with market stalls. These were few and far between now. Most vendors came from nearby villages to sell their wares, but with demons roaming the lands these days, not many people were brave enough to travel. The reduced market meant reduced traffic, leaving the city as a whole somewhat desolate.

I looked around the tense streets, and my eyes fell on a familiar face across the way. She noticed me too and stopped... then started walking toward us.

“Mistress Lina. Master Gourry,” she called. Her hair, the color of sunset, rustled in the breeze. Her features were as delicate as ever, but there was no longer sorrow in her eyes.

I spoke up, timidly, but with a smile nonetheless. “It’s been a while. How are you doing, Rubia?”

Rubia’s place was in a quiet area on the far side of town. Her house... Or maybe you should call it a shop? Her small flower shop sat in the middle of an open lot. She’d explained on the way over that the sorcerer she’d once served had left it to her upon his passing.

Thinking back on how Gourry and I had met Rubia... Frankly, I wasn’t entirely sure how to interact with her. But she didn’t seem to share my awkwardness and had warmly invited us over as acquaintances.

“Come on in,” she said.

We stepped into the shop full of greenery and flowers in all colors. She offered us some aromatic tea, the smell of which wafted through the place.

“Thanks,” I said as I took a sip, allowing its unique flavor to fill my mouth. It was an especially fragrant tea. The sort that always kinda reminded me of medicine. And yet... “Wow, this is delicious,” I found myself whispering. With milk and sugar added, the tea’s aroma, creaminess, and sweetness achieved a perfect balance. A girl could get used to tea like that.

“Indeed, it’s quite fine.” Was it the tea or the greenery that had mellowed Mephy out? Either way, she graced Rubia with a rare compliment.

“I’m glad you like it,” Rubia replied with a smile.

“You have so many kinds of flowers,” Mephy continued. “Potted as well. You tend them well, for a human.” Naturally, as an elf, she could assess the condition of the flowers in the shop at a glance. I wished she’d give the same level of attention to anything else, of course...

“Thank you. I raised them all myself,” said Rubia.

“Alone?” I found myself asking.

“Yes,” she replied like it was nothing.

“Isn’t that hard?”

“Oh... I’m used to it. I used to cultivate herbs, after all,” she said.

Ah. That explains it.

When most people think of a sorcerer, they picture some jerk chucking spells around willy-nilly, blasting away bad guys and monsters. But that’s actually a misunderstanding.

...

Yes, I know that’s not convincing coming from me, but I’m telling you, it’s a misunderstanding!

Ahem. When we speak of magic, we speak of powers that don’t normally exist in this world. Sorcery is the art of drawing on those otherworldly powers through various methods for our own purposes. And a sorcerer is a person who practices that art.

In other words, any fool could memorize a simple spell like Lighting, speak the

chant, and cast it. But that doesn't make them a sorcerer. A bona fide sorcerer has a vast mental library of knowledge and the ability to piece together seemingly unrelated phenomena based on it. Wisdom, you could say.

Plants and herbs play a very important role in the rituals and research that entails. But when you need a particular variety, there's nothing more irritating than having to trawl around some mountainside who-knows-where, so most sorcerers cultivate their own collection. That way, you can pick them when you need them, and if you have extras, you can preserve them and sell them to a magic shop for good coin. Two birds with one stone.

So as a former sorcerer's assistant, there was nothing unusual about Rubia having experience with plants.

"Even so... It's impressive you do all this by yourself," I said sincerely.

She blushed. "Well, this is really nothing compared to raising a delicate mandragora..."

The mandragora, with its deadly scream... Yeah, not particularly romantic, that one.

"But..." Mephy looked around her and frowned. "I see flowers here that aren't in season."

"Oh, I have a greenhouse," Rubia said casually.

"A greenhouse?!" I unwittingly shouted.

"What's that?" Gourry asked.

I didn't fault him for his ignorance there. I was only in the know because I'd read about greenhouses in scrolls and heard talk here and there.

"It's a house made of transparent glass for cultivating plants. You can regulate the temperature within to grow things out of season."

"A house... made of glass?!" Gourry parroted in surprise.

I couldn't blame him. The only glass we'd ever seen was the stained glass of churches. To create large transparent panes required a skilled artisan, and they were accordingly quite pricey. Moreover, glass was fragile. To build a whole house out of it for growing plants... I frankly couldn't imagine anyone pulling it

off. A single neighborhood brat with a stone-throwing habit could do a lot of damage awfully fast, and maintaining a consistent temperature inside had to be a labor-intensive process.

Easy to break, time-consuming... Most people, let alone sorcerers, wouldn't have the time to make a greenhouse just for growing things. The sorcerer Rubia used to serve had an out-of-the-way location, let's say, and an assistant to tend to it in his place. But even so...

"Do you really have one, Rubia?!" I shouted.

"Er... you don't have to sound so surprised. Why would I lie?"

"Well, I thought it might be some kind of scam. 'You, too, can be an owner of a greenhouse!' Or something like that."

"I would never do anything so foolish. Would you like to see it?" she offered.

"Yes! Please!" I immediately agreed.

"I wanna see it too!" Gourry followed suit.

While we were getting fired up, Milgazia and Mephy sighed and sipped their tea soberly.

"Shall we join them, Uncle Milgazia?"

"I suppose, although I don't understand it at all..."

"This is... This is it..." It stood there in Rubia's back garden, glittering nobly under the Atlas City sun. "The legendary greenhouse!"

"'Legendary'?"

I say "back garden," but her property was actually a rather large parcel surrounded by trees in the middle of farmland. Various flowers and herbs grew all around. I wondered if the trees bore some kind of medicinal fruits as well.

And there it was in the center of the yard...

About the size of a shed! With metal rods running horizontally and vertically! And see-through glass set between them! A true crystal castle of nature! Okay, that's a little much! But indeed, it really was a greenhouse!

Gourry and I peppered Rubia with questions.

“Hey! Can I get close? Can I get close?”

“Can I keep breathing even after I get close?!”

“Yes, of course you may...” Rubia replied with a strained smile.

We carefully approached the structure.

“Hey... Hey, can I touch it?!” Gourry asked excitedly.

“Oh, please! I don’t need permission to touch it! Take this!” I declared, raising my hand to the glass.

“Aha! Me too!” Gourry did the same.

“Heh heh heh. You went and touched it, Gourry...”

“Y-You did too, Lina!”

“Fool! I’m wearing gloves!”

“So am I... Wait, ah! Mine’re fingerless gloves! You tricked me!”

“Gwahahaha! You fell for it, Gourry! But you have no one to blame but yourself! You touched the greenhouse bare-fingered without permission! Now you’ll pay the price!”

“Er, excuse me, you two...” While Gourry and I were having our fun, Rubia spoke up from behind us, consternated. “It’s not a haunted house and it isn’t going to curse you, so please don’t look so afraid, Master Gourry. But I’m thrilled you’re so excited about it. Would you like to step inside?”

At this, me and the trembling Gourry leaned forward, our eyes shining. “Can we?! We don’t need to pay an entrance fee?!”

“Of course not.”

“And we won’t be cursed if we go in?!”

“Of course not.”

“Woo-hoo!” Gourry and I let out a whoop.

“Er... what are they so happy about, Uncle Milgazia?”

“I truly do not understand humans.”

Ignoring the party poopers’ cool reception vis-à-vis this marvel of technology, Gourry and I followed Rubia inside.

“Waaah! There’s herbs growing in here! Herbs!”

“Well, yes, that’s what it’s for.”

“Waaah! There’s a stone pillar in the center!”

“Yes. When it gets cold, I heat the stone, which keeps the greenhouse warm for an extended period of time.”

“Heh heh! Just being grown here gives these flowers a particular nobility! Look at this! How elegantly the leaves curve on this one!”

“Mistress Lina, that’s a weed.”

“Amazing! There’s a tree in here too! Even though it’s dead!” Gourry remarked.

“A tree? I don’t grow trees here...” Rubia frowned, apparently ignorant of the presence of a dead tree in the greenhouse—

Wait... A dead tree?!

“Rubia! Run!”

“What?” Rubia whispered in confusion.

Just then, Gourry, who seemed to have picked up on what was happening, dove in, swept her up, and dashed for the greenhouse door! There was a roar through the air, followed by the sound of something hard breaking. As I took off after Gourry and Rubia, I saw the stone pillar at the center of the greenhouse shatter out of the corner of my eye. And appearing from behind it...

“What’s wrong?!”

“What’s going on?!”

“A demon!” I howled at the shocked Milgazia and Mephy as they came running up to me, then looked back at the greenhouse. “It’s the dead tree one that attacked us before! Be careful!”

The door to the greenhouse was wide open. The stone pillar inside was broken. But... there was no sign of the dead tree demon.

“Where is it?” Mephy asked with a frown.

“It was there! I swear!” I said, my eyes fixed on the glass shed.

“Wh... What was that?!” Rubia asked fearfully.

“A demon! Get to safety!” I replied.

“Get to safety? Where?”

I opened my mouth, but I didn’t know what to tell her. There really wasn’t anywhere safe when dealing with a pure demon, and leaving the group might just make her more vulnerable. “Okay, just be careful!”

The instant those words left my mouth, I felt a presence appear beside me. I turned to see the ground swell up before assuming the shape of the dead tree demon. And as it took form...

Slash! Gourry wasn’t about to let it make the first move. He closed in in the blink of an eye and cut it down. Still, I knew we couldn’t relax yet. And just as expected...

“Behind you!” Mephy cried.

Rubia and I leaped to the side in time to let arrows the color of the dead wood fly past, stick into the ground, and regenerate into a tree demon! I looked in the direction the arrows had come from... and saw another dead tree demon standing there.

“What’s going on here?!” Gourry asked in a panic.

“Calm down!” I called in response. “This is probably like the Red and Gray demons we fought at Dragons’ Peak! They’re two in one, so if you only defeat half, the other half regrows it!”

“It sounds like we’ll need to attack both at once, then!” Milgazia declared, stepping forward.

“Exactly! So get to it, if you please!”

“I shall!” Milgazia swept out his hands, pointing one at each of the demons,

then let out an earth-shaking howl.

Clearly realizing the danger they were in, the two demons began to sink into the ground... then rose back up again!

“You won’t escape us!” Mephy proclaimed as her white armor expanded behind her like wings and released a howl of its own. The tree demons trying to escape into the ground—rather, into the astral plane—had been dragged back into ours by her armor’s power.

Vrrroosh! Beams of light flew from Milgazia’s hands and shattered the dead trees. Well... one of them, anyway.

We all gasped. Milgazia’s second blast was blocked right before it landed... not by the tree demon, but by the hand of a young man who hadn’t been there just a moment ago.

Dude looked about Gourry’s age, with an unremarkable face, dusty blond hair, and an unassuming gaze. He was tall and lanky, and didn’t seem particularly tough. But needless to say, I wasn’t judging this book by its cover! He’d appeared out of nowhere, after all, and stopped Milgazia’s strike—strong enough to obliterate a pure demon—with a single hand.

“Isn’t this a florist’s? That’s no good... A florist shouldn’t be mean to trees,” he said airily, turning his gaze on Milgazia and Mephy. “Ah, but you have a dragon and an elf too? This is the first I’ve heard of that. Aha... you’re using that ugly armor to mask your presence. That’s not playing fair, is it?”

“U-Ugly?!” Mephy shouted, clearly unhappy about hearing the straight-up truth. But of course, she wasn’t careless enough to leave herself vulnerable. She was keenly aware that even though this dude *looked* like a young man, he was unmistakably a powerful demon. Sufficiently powerful pure demons could appear human, after all.

“Plants are things to be treasured. We should all put a little more green in the world.” With that nonsense, he raised his hand, in which... Was it a chestnut? Something to that effect appeared in his palm. “See? Like this.”

He tossed it and it landed with a hard sound, splitting open to reveal the fruit inside. *Grmmm...* The fruit grew to the size of a human head, and from it,

dozens upon dozens of insect legs sprouted, drawing it up to human height! The headless spider—frankly, calling it that feels like an insult to spiders—looked like a pulsing green brain mounted on top of countless twisted legs.

The husk from which the “fruit” had come underwent its own transformation. It grew instantly, swelled, and took the shape of a humanoid stack of bones. If you think I’m describing a skeleton, you’re dead wrong. I *wish* it had been a skeleton. No, I’m being literal. It genuinely looked like some kind of bones—not sure what kind they were, but definitely not of this world—big and small, lumped together haphazardly in a vaguely humanoid shape. Some kind of green fluid leaked from the seams where the bones knitted together.

Needless to say, these things were also demons. I didn’t think they’d actually come out of the chestnut, mind you. That was just the signal for them to appear from wherever they’d been hiding.

“Well, they are both green... But I’d rather not see any more of *that* put into this world.”

“Oh, please. Don’t be like that. The cute little green one is Vaidaz. And the beautiful green one is Gwon. Oh... They’re both green. Is that confusing?”

“No need to clarify. They’re both second-rate demons we’re gonna crush in seconds.”

“How cruel. I, Bradu, consider them both my precious friends. And it’s not nice to judge others by their appearances, no sir. People who aren’t nice deserve death. Yes, then it’s decided.”

And with that invitation—from Bradu, apparently—the demons sprang into action!

“Skree!” With a strange cry emanating from who-the-heck-knows-where, the brainbug demon readied its legs to scuttle forward. By the way, just FYI, I’m not even gonna try to learn these things’ names!

I chanted a spell under my breath as Gourry ran over and moved to protect me.

“Not so fast!” Milgazia fired a magic ball of light. But before it could reach the brainbug...

“I told you to be kind to plants, didn’t I?” Bradu leaped forward from the sidelines and, with a flicking motion, released an energy ball that intercepted Milgazia’s blast midflight!

What followed was a rush of air and a flash. The shock wave shattered the glass of the nearby greenhouse and stopped us all in our tracks.

Noooooooooo! The greenhouse! ...Okay, right, priorities!

A dark figure charged through the flash!

“Hold it right there!” *Vwee!* Mephy’s armor shot out light and reduced the incoming foe to sparks! It was one of the dead tree demons.

A decoy?! I thought, but in that same instant, the bone demon appeared right next to me!

“Gotcha!” Gourry moved immediately, his sword gleaming as he swung. When the strike connected, the bone demon’s body exploded! Green fluid gushed out, and...

Oh, crap!

I realized it instinctively with no basis or reason. The bone demon’s weapon wasn’t spells or brute strength... It was this fluid! The demon had ridden the shock wave toward us in pieces, then reconstituted at my side and *let* Gourry smash it in order to rain down a shower of the stuff at point-blank range.

The moment seemed to last forever. The green liquid filled my entire field of vision. And then—*Whoosh!*—the spray changed direction abruptly and spattered on the ground beside me.

Bluuurshbrrrb... The ground covered in the stuff began to smoke with an eerie noise.

It worked just like I’d feared. I figured Milgazia or Mephy must have twigged the danger and saved my hide, but...

“What?!” As the last of the light faded, Bradu let out a noise of surprise, but he wasn’t looking at us. I reflexively glanced in the direction he was staring and...

Gweh?! I retreated a half step.

The red figure moved a long distance in a flash and grabbed onto the reconstituting bone demon. An inhuman scream rang out. I heard a hard cracking noise.

Greeeeyaaaah! It was the death rattle of the bone demon breaking apart...

“Gwon!” Bradu cried, but there was nothing left to respond to him.

The bone demon had been turned into dust and scattered by the red figure’s sinewy hand. It seemed he was the one who’d stopped the fluid attack, not Milgazia or Mephy.

Sheesh, this guy’s still hard to look at. But first at the restaurant, and now this? What in the world...?

Bradu remained as unassuming as ever, even as he turned a hateful glare on the muscly demon. “You traitor!”

“I could say the same to you,” the red guy responded, glaring back.

“What’s going on here?” Milgazia asked.

“How should I know?” I quipped instinctively.

“I see... It’s a question of which one you serve, then,” remarked Bradu.

“Exactly,” said the red demon.

“Hey! Someone wanna clue me in?!” I shouted, interrupting the exchange. The muscly demon seemed like he was on our side for now, so I thought he might be willing to explain, but...

“I don’t have to explain anything to a mere human,” he spat, clear hatred in his voice.

Well, that confirms that... We aren’t enemies at the moment, but we sure as heck aren’t allies either.

“Have it your way... But I still intend to see this through, and if you try to stop me, I’ll destroy you too. No more, no less,” Bradu declared. The brainbug demon and two tree demons stepped forward again, and...

Twitch!

I felt a shudder run through me. My legs went numb. *What... What’s going on*

here?! I fell to my knees, completely baffled, then looked around and saw Gourry, Rubia, and Mephy in a similar state. Milgazia was still standing, although just barely. His legs were trembling. We'd definitely been hit by an attack of some kind, but I wasn't sure what it was!

The muscly demon, seemingly unaffected, ran at the swaying brainbug! When he did—*Vwip!*—a brown lance thrust out of the ground and impaled him.

“Graaaaah!” As the red guy let out a scream, the piercing lance split into a multitude of branches inside of him. That was it. He broke into pieces, turned into white ash in midair, and disappeared on the wind. All without giving us a single bit of information.

The branches of the lance then twisted together... And morphed into the form of a dead tree demon!

A third?! I thought they were a double act! Based on the red guy's priorities, I could infer that the unknown attack had come from the brainbug. But even with that knowledge, there was nothing I could do to stop it.

Yet just as I was thinking that—*Vwumm!*—Mephy's armor opened like wings and released a low hum. As it did, the limpness in my body vanished like a bad dream.

“Hraaaaagh!” With a howl that shook the air around him, Milgazia conjured a pale blue ball of magic and threw it at the brainbug!

The light scorched the air around it, evaporated a few of the eerie creature's legs... and then suddenly stopped midair.

“Goodness me... I finally find you, and what do we have here?” As the new arrival spoke, the orb contracted and absorbed into his hand without a trace. “Picking yet another fight, I see. But then, I suppose that's just who you are...”

“Bwuh...?” I whispered hoarsely.

“You...” Milgazia did the same.

It was Gourry who spoke his name. “Xellos!”

Priest of the Beast, Xellos... Indeed, we knew this guy.

That smile, totally inappropriate to the situation. Those black robes. At first

glance, he looked like the kind of mysterious priest every family has one or two of. But there was more to this guy than met the eye.

He was the personal retainer of Greater Beast Zellas Metallium, one of the Dark Lord's five lieutenants. He was also the demon who'd single-handedly destroyed a dragon army a thousand years ago in the Incarnation War. He was probably one of the strongest demons out there, bar the Dark Lord and his lieutenants. And... yeah, you could say Gourry and I had a history with him.

"Don't engage, Mephy," Milgazia said softly.

"What?" Mephy asked. She didn't know anything about Xellos.

"Ah, well, well... I see. Hah hah hah." At Xellos's appearance, Bradu let out a knowing chuckle. "It seems the battle's over, then... Or is it?!"

With that, he launched his orbs of light at us! But—*Bwoosh!*—a swing of Xellos's staff dispersed them en route.

"What?!"

"Don't get the wrong idea, Master Bradu." Xellos walked forward unceremoniously and placed a friendly hand on the dead tree demon, his gaze focused on Bradu. "The truth is, I empathize with the bat from the old story..."

At this, Bradu fell silent. I mean, this was pretty typical Xellos, if we're being honest...

"In other words, I'm a neutral party. Though, speaking as an individual... Ah, but never mind that."

"When we last parted ways, you suggested we'd be enemies the next time we crossed paths," I spoke up in place of the silenced Bradu.

Xellos looked at us. "Well, it's in the nature of circumstances to change, isn't it? Also... I wouldn't say we're exactly on the same side either," he admitted bluntly.

"I see. And? What are you plotting this time? What's going on in Sairaag?"

"That's—"

"Don't say 'a secret'! Tell us. This is a trade!"

“A trade?!” Xellos’s eyebrow sprang up as if I’d made fun of him. “Now, now... Miss Lina, I don’t think you have a single thing to trade with me!”

“Don’t play dumb with me! Remember that restaurant back when we arrived in Gyria City? You didn’t have enough change, so I lent you two coppers! You owe me, man!”

“E-Excuse me! You still remember that?!”

“Wait a minute... That means you remember it too! And if you remember it, then not paying your dues would be the lowest of the low! Or is that just how Greater Beast’s servants roll?!”

“Well, it was such a little thing... I don’t know why you feel the need to resort to threats. Or to bring Lord Greater Beast’s name into it.” He scratched at his cheek, looking genuinely troubled.

And during all this, Bradu had remained perfectly still. More precisely... he felt he had no choice but to remain still, I’ll bet. Anyone who knew Xellos’s power would be smart to lie low until they knew what his game was.

“Well... we’ll discuss the matter of the coppers later,” Xellos said. He then turned his gaze back to Bradu. “If I might be so bold, Master Bradu, I believe it’s very silly for demons to kill each other over something as trivial as this.”

“Trivial?!” Hostility appeared in Bradu’s eyes in response to Xellos’s casual statement.

“Now, don’t get the wrong idea. I’m referring to the lives of a few humans. Although we occupy slightly different positions right now, you’re still a demon. Besides, we’ve had a rather bad run of it lately. We really shouldn’t fight and risk one of us dying. So... I was wondering if you might withdraw for now, out of respect for me?”

Bradu stared darkly into Xellos’s eyes for a time. I guess he realized he didn’t stand a chance, because he, the dead tree demon, and the brainbug all vanished into thin air at once. He was apparently backing off... For the time being, at least.

“Let’s see now... Oh?” Once Bradu was gone, Xellos looked around. His eyes fell on the busted greenhouse, as if noticing it for the first time. “Isn’t that a

rare sight? A greenhouse, I believe. But... Goodness. So many broken panes. I suppose it happened when they attacked you, didn't it? Which means this is on you, Miss Lina. Each pane is so expensive, and the plants inside will suffer until they're replaced. What a tragic loss!"

"Hey... What are you getting at, Xellos?"

"Why, nothing at all!" he replied, looking at me with his trademark unflappable smile. "But if I repair the greenhouse, wouldn't you say that repays the two-copper debt I owe you?"

"You'll repair it?" Two coppers wouldn't even cover the cost of fixing a single bar of the frame. But the idea of Xellos repairing the greenhouse gave me the delightful mental image of him dressed like a carpenter, swinging around a hammer. "Okay. Go ahead, then," I replied without a second thought.

"Very well. In that case..." Xellos swung his staff. Instantly, the fallen shards of glass lit up, floated into the air, and began to reassemble in their empty frames.



Then came a burst of orange light, and when it receded, the greenhouse was restored without so much as a crack to show for the damage it had suffered. In fact, it looked even more transparent and well crafted than before.

Curse you, Xellos! I wanted to see you dressed as a carpenter!

"It... It can't be," Mephy breathed. "Extracting just the glass components from a particular area and reassembling them in the desired form... It's theoretically possible, but to do it so quickly... Instantly!" she muttered to herself.

Well, it was obvious even to me that what Xellos had done was pretty impressive. Was he saying such a feat was only worth two coppers to him?

"Indeed... It would be rather difficult for you to replicate that, wouldn't it?" Xellos said, smiling at Mephy. There was no braggadocio or sarcasm in his tone. He sounded like he was simply stating a fact.

"Who *are* you?" Mephy replied in a strained whisper.

"I'm sure you've heard his name, Mephy. This is Xellos," Milgazia reminded her.

At this, she was silent for a moment. She then gasped, "The Dragon Slayer of the Incarnation War?!"

Xellos merely clicked his tongue and wagged his finger. "That title's a bit too audacious for me. I much prefer being called 'the mysterious priest' or 'that unknown but agreeable young man.'"

"How about 'cockroach-cloak'? Or maybe 'messenger demon'?" I snarked.

"Miss Linaaa..." He glared at me in response.

"But..." Milgazia began. He was watching Xellos carefully and closely. "You said you 'finally found' someone, and your involvement suggests some kind of grand plan in the works. What are you after, messenger demon?"

Dang, the dragon actually went there!

"*Please* don't call me that! It's Xellos! X-E-L-L-O-S!" he protested with a rare raising of his voice. He then looked back at me. "Now that I've repaired the greenhouse, my debt to you is fulfilled. And so, our larger plans must remain..."

He raised a finger to his lips.

“A secret?” Gourry asked casually a second before Xellos could finish.

The Priest’s mouth went agape, and he looked for a moment like he was about to cry. “You’re terrible, Master Gourry!” he said at last in the tone of a pouting child, then disappeared into thin air.

Only silence was left in his wake.

“Well... he’s...” Mephy said timidly after a spell. “He’s not exactly what I’d imagined.”

“That’s what makes him terrifying,” I said, my tone sharp. “He’s the type to cut off someone’s head with a grand ol’ smile.”

It took a while before I finally wiped off the cold sweat forming on my brow.

3: A Meeting in a Distant Land, Under a Foreign Sky

“You’re leaving already?” Rubia, standing at the door to the small flower shop, sounded chagrined.

It wasn’t long after Xellos had vanished.

“Well, it seems like we’ve gotten ourselves into another fine mess and all,” I said awkwardly, scratching the back of my head. “I couldn’t even start to guess what’s really going on... but if we stay here, it’ll only mean trouble for you.”

“It’s no trouble at all, really...”

“Besides, if anything happened to the greenhouse, I doubt we’d be able to get someone to repair it again. And I won’t stand for that!” I clenched my fist tight. “I won’t let it be destroyed! That greenhouse is the pinnacle of human civilization!”

“I-I’m not sure I’d go quite that far, but...”

“The point is, we have business elsewhere and any delay in tending to it is just going to make things worse for everyone. But I’m glad we got to see you, Rubia. I’m glad you’re doing so well.”

Rubia averted her eyes slightly when I said that. “Hardly...” She let out a small sigh. “I was thrilled to see you all after so long, but you know... what I went through... It isn’t something I can ever forget.”

Ahh, that look in her eyes... It was a deep exhaustion.

“But I’ll make do somehow.” She turned to me with a smile to conceal her sadness. “Take care on your journey, then. I hope you’ll come back to visit if you can.” With that, Rubia gave us a small bow.

Her moist eyes in that moment left a striking impression on me.

I knew the source of her melancholy. The sorcerer she’d once served had gone on a murderous rampage, and Rubia had been forced to kill him with her own hands. What emotions still lingered in her heart over the incident? It

wasn't hard to guess. To be forced to end someone's life like that... Like she said, it wasn't something she'd ever forget.

In truth, I couldn't even begin to imagine what she was feeling. But regardless, she'd chosen to live and continue walking toward tomorrow. At least, that's what I wanted to believe.



“Is there something on your mind?” Mephy asked, peering at me from the side.

“Oh, um... Just trying to figure out where to get dinner and lodging for the night,” I lied.

We’d just left Rubia’s and returned to the city’s main drag.

“Hmm...” Mephy acknowledged offhandedly. “Well, I’m sure she’ll be all right. Though I won’t presume to ask what happened.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Oh, yes, of course. Lodging for the night,” she replied, playing dumb.

Darn it... She’s got pretty good instincts from time to time.

“Well, we’re a bit between two stools in that regard,” she said with a glance up at the late afternoon sun.

Indeed, it was too low in the sky for us to make it to the next village or town before nightfall, but it was also too early to find an inn and get some shut-eye. We were indeed between two stools. Normally we’d just hang around in the city at times like this, but we’d only just been victim to an ambush, and I wasn’t eager to invite another onto someone’s doorstep.

“We’ll have to save that question for later,” said Milgazia.

I realized then that he’d stopped in his tracks. Gourry had too. Mephy and I turned to follow their eyes.

“Eh?” she remarked, while I gasped at what I saw. There, at the end of the road—which was even more deserted now than it had been that morning—stood a lanky young man with an unremarkable face and unassuming gaze.

Bradú?! Darn it! I thought he’d scarpered!

And just as I thought that... *Thwum!* My body shook. My muscles went limp.

Is this... that unknown attack from earlier?! I saw a few other passersby twitch and collapse.

Vvvvvmmm! Mephy’s armor hummed to life. My strength returned. And then...

“Hraaah!” Milgazia howled! The beam he shot out streaked in a seemingly random direction, shaking the tips of the branches of the trees along the lane until...

Skreee! A strange cry echoed out around us, and the brainbug revealed itself from—or rather, collapsed out of—the nearby greenery. There was a big hole in its central brain, presumably from Milgazia’s beam. Its legs continued to scrabble at the air for a while, but eventually stopped, and its whole body crumbled like a dry sandcastle.

The passersby probably had no idea what was going on, but it was obvious enough that trouble was afoot. They quickly took off screaming. That left the four of us alone with Bradu... although I was betting the dead tree demon wasn’t far off.

“That was pointless,” said Milgazia, his eyes fixed on the unflapped Bradu. “That demon rubbed its legs together to produce sonic vibrations that human ears can’t perceive. Humans would never be able to identify the source, but Mephy and I could with ease.”

Of course... So that was the brainbug’s ability. Mephy pegged it and had her armor vibrate at a different frequency to drown it out.

Once you knew the trick, it was easy to counter. But since the sound was totally inaudible to humans, we hadn’t stood a chance of stopping it ourselves. It was tailor-made for fighting us... and I don’t know what we would’ve done without Milgazia and Mephy.

“Please. It’s no skin off my nose.” Bradu merely waved his hand in an unconcerned fashion. “Once I realized they had a dragon and an elf with them, I deemed Vaidaz useless anyway. I mean, it was still worth a try, but the failure was expected. And since he had nothing else to contribute, there’s no real loss in sacrificing him to declare my hostile intentions, is there?”

“I thought he was your precious friend,” I sniped.

“Oh, indeed... He *was*,” Bradu said jokingly in response. “And when a precious friend is killed, one channels one’s sorrow and anger into a quest for vengeance... You humans love that kind of story, don’t you?”

“I prefer one-sided smackdowns of second-rate villains who kill off their own teammates. Those really get me.”

“What a shame. It appears we have different tastes. But I have to correct you on one point... From my perspective, I’m the star of this show. *You* are the villains.”

“You’re a pretty pathetic leading man in that case. Didn’t you just turn tail and run because Xellos smiled at you?”

“So I did... Consider this our rematch. Though I recognize it’s a bit early for one.”

“And your ‘friend’ there died two seconds in. If you’re the hero of this story, it seems like you’re gunning for one tragic ending.”

“Does it? I don’t see it that way. Perhaps we should put our claims to the test?”

“Not much else to do, is there?”

“Of course.”

The moment Bradu responded... *Crash!* The flagstones of the road erupted, and the dead tree demon burst forth. Correction! Make that three of them!

“I’m afraid we know their trick as well!” Milgazia howled and fired three beams of light, each of which raced toward a different tree demon.

“You think you can win just because you know the trick?!” Bradu smiled mockingly and conjured a bullet of light.

Ker-psh! One of Milgazia’s beams shattered midair. And then... *Blam!* All three tree demons exploded in the same instant!

“I do,” Mephy said confidently.

While Bradu was focused on Milgazia’s attack, Mephy had fired a beam along a different course, smashing through all three trees simultaneously. But...

“Are you so sure about that?” Bradu asked coyly.

With a yelp of surprise, we leaped away from where we were standing. Wooden spears, the likes of which had claimed the muscly demon’s life earlier,

pierced up through the flagstones... then transformed into *four* dead tree demons!

Wait, there's more?!

"You see?" Bradu taunted.

As we scattered, each of the four dead tree demons pursued us individually. I dodged woody arrows as I chanted under my breath. Milgazia howled and Mephy unfurled her armor. Gourry's sword flashed, and...

Roarr! Three of the four trees were felled almost instantly! But I hadn't finished my spell quickly enough to take out mine! The lone remaining tree demon fired its wooden arrows in random directions, promptly producing three more of its kind.

"Excuse me! What are you doing?!" Mephy barked.

Shut up! You know it takes humans time to recite spells! I managed to finish my incantation, picked my moment, and... "Elemekia Lance!"

Vwoosh! I unleashed my spell at the dead tree demon in front of me. Milgazia and Mephy also unleashed their beams. Gourry flashed his sword too.

"Nope, too bad." Bradu unceremoniously fired a bullet of light that intercepted Mephy's beam midair. The result? We defeated three of the demons, and yet again, the surviving tree fired off wooden arrows to propagate.

Darn it. These guys aren't tough on their own, but...

Given the way they'd taken out the muscly demon, the tree demons clearly knew how to pack a punch, but they had scant defenses and simple attack patterns. Frankly speaking, they were pretty lame as pure demons went. The trouble was that they kept regenerating. There were only four of them, but no matter how many we beat, they kept springing up like bamboo shoots...

Wait... Wait a minute!

While dodging another simple attack from one of the tree demons, I recited the Demon Blood talismans' amplification chant. Then I incanted under my breath... "Zellas Bullid!"

The beam of light I produced streaked toward the dead tree demon immediately in front of me. But just before it hit... the beam changed course for the spectating Bradu!

“Child’s play!” Bradu leaped out of the way. My light gave chase, but a fifth dead tree demon appeared to intercept it. *Smash!* There was no time for the beam to change course, so it crashed into the fifth demon and destroyed them both.

“Was that supposed to be a surprise attack?!” Bradu shouted mockingly.

My tone, meanwhile, was triumphant. “No, that was an experiment! Listen up, everyone! These things are all an extension of Bradu! If we defeat him, they’re toast!”

“What?!” Bradu exclaimed in shock.

Yep. Called it! The fact that the dead tree demon had originally shown up solo led me to believe it was an independent entity, but that was just part of the trick.

At first, I’d thought the dead tree demons had the same relationship as the Red/Gray demon we’d fought a while back, but I was dead wrong. Bradu and the tree demons were more like General Sherra and the magic sword Dulgoffa—in other words, a master and their extension. United yet separate individuals. The dead tree demons would continue to regenerate as long as Bradu was alive, and when he kicked it, so would they.

Watching the way the dead tree demons kept springing up, it had crossed my mind that they were a lot like bamboo—that is, one central organism with roots that spread out and budded aboveground. But if that was the case, then where was the core?

The answer was easy: right in front of my eyes.

Bradu had named the bone demon and the brainbug demon. He’d even called them his precious friends. But not the dead tree demons. Why was that? Was it because they were merely an extension of himself? I’d had to wonder.

And then there was Xellos. When the Priest first addressed Bradu, he intentionally put his hand on a dead tree demon. Maybe that had been a

declaration—“Your tricks won’t work on me.” Bradu’s connection to the tree demons would also explain their ability to reconstitute themselves indiscriminately. Maybe protecting them repeatedly was a bluff to give us the wrong idea.

“I see! I trust you, human!” Milgazia produced a dozen... no, *dozens* of balls of light that streaked toward Bradu.

“Guh!” Bradu’s form flickered as it threatened to vanish into thin air.

Vwummmm! Mephy’s armor then resounded like buzzing wings, anchoring Bradu to our world. And finally...

Ka-kroosh!

A hit! When Milgazia’s countless orbs burst, all we could see was the tree demons—Bradu’s extensions—in a burned, twisted, interlocked mass.

I see. So he uses them both as swords and as shields.

That’s when Gourry charged in. *Krrshashashashah!* His sword flashed through the air in a whirlwind, and then he leaped back. And just as the diced-up “shield” was about to fall to bits...

“Dynast Blas!”

Crackle-crackapop! I fired magical lightning straight into it!

“Graaah!” Bradu screamed as his wooden fortification exploded, revealing him once again. He looked like he’d been through hell... but he wasn’t out yet!



Milgazia roared, conjuring a pale blue light in his hand.

“W-Wait!” Bradu begged.

Yeah, like anyone’s gonna do that.

“Do you know what’s really going on in Sairaag?! What’s happening there?!”

Okay, yeah, that one gave Milgazia pause. I mean, I had to admit that we *were* pretty curious about that...

“Really, no need to tell them,” came a new voice.

Bradu gasped, but before he could do anything—*Bwoosh!*—a black drill appeared from nowhere and bisected him along the waist.

“That’s...!” Milgazia gasped just as Bradu’s body turned to white ash and began to scatter on the wind. A moment later, the fragments of his shield and his remaining “extensions” met the same fate.

By then, the black drill that had destroyed Bradu was already gone.

“Yeeeeeeah, I figured you were still around... Xellos.”

“Oh? You don’t seem particularly surprised, Miss Lina.”

I could hear him, but he didn’t appear. His voice seemed to be coming from all around me. I’d seen those black drills once before. They were presumably part of Xellos’s true form.

“I’m not. You said you were neutral, right? But knowing you, that doesn’t mean you won’t interfere. It just means you’re happy to watch from the sidelines as a disinterested third party.”

“A very accurate interpretation,” he replied with an audible note of a wince.

“You said you interfered before because you didn’t want to lose more demons. But I suspect you’re even less eager to see your big plans go to waste. So you masked your presence and stayed close. If Bradu withdrew or let us kill him, that would’ve been fine. But the moment he showed any sign of giving the game away... This was your contingency, right?”

“Excellent instincts, Miss Lina. Truly excellent,” Xellos said with satisfaction.

Whenever this guy gets involved, you just know there's bad news afoot...

“At any rate, the second-rate ‘star’ is dealt with now and thus my business here is concluded. Miss Lina, Master Gourry... I wish you both a fine journey to Sairaag.”

“Wait! Xellos!” I shouted quickly—but my call went without answer.

Things went pretty smoothly after that. Obviously, the demon attacks were still ongoing in the wider world and we had to punk a few roaming demidemons on the road. We even encountered a pure demon every now and then, but Milgazia took care of them easily and that was that. So yeah, by most standards, our trip was a stormy one. But compared to being stalked by a demon of Bradu’s caliber, it was basically a walk in the park for us. Point is, there were no major incidents after we left Atlas.

We hadn’t seen Xellos since we left either. Knowing him, he probably wouldn’t show up again (so long as another fool like Bradu didn’t threaten to spill the demonic beans). We also hadn’t caught sight of my doppelgänger—presumably some other demon in disguise—since setting off. All in all, you could say the journey was going well, but there was no way to guarantee our good fortune would last. After all, we were almost to Sairaag.

We were currently walking down a wooded road through the forest around Sairaag City, once known as the Miasma Forest. We were the only people around.

“Be careful, humans,” Milgazia whispered suddenly, a stark tension in his voice.

The miasma that had once lingered in the forest was long gone, but a different, curious feeling hung over the place now. It didn’t feel like an awaiting ambush. I don’t know how to put it. It wasn’t exactly unpleasant or uncomfortable. It was just a feeling of... *something* hanging thick in the air. What it was, I couldn’t say. That was the best I knew how to describe it. But Milgazia’s superhuman senses—or rather, his extraordinary instinct—seemed to have sussed out the cause.

“The atmosphere is certainly strange... Do you know why?” I asked.

“I don’t,” he replied flatly.

Well, so much for that, I guess!

“I don’t know, but something is amiss. And because I can’t identify it, that’s reason for you to be on your guard.”

“Okay, but... it’s a little hard to be on my guard against the unknown.”

“I just mean keep your wits about you.”

“Was already doing that, thanks.”

No offense, but how stupid would you have to be to let your guard down in a situation like this? I still didn’t know why the demons had called us to Sairaag, but it was pretty obviously *not* for crackers, cake, and a nice meal. Moreover, while we weren’t in the city yet, we were definitely close now. The “welcome” could strike at any time.

“Someone’s here,” Gourry announced while Milgazia and I were talking.

We peered curiously in the direction he was looking and couldn’t see anyone down the winding, tree-lined road. It wasn’t long, however, before two figures—previously obscured by the forest—stepped into view.

The minute we saw them, we all stopped in place.

The two figures just stood there watching. They were waiting, no doubt, for us.

They were both women who looked to be about twenty years old. One was tall, with short blonde hair that shone like the sun. Her gaze betrayed no sign of hostility, and she was dressed like an ordinary traveler. She didn’t appear to have weapons or armor on her person, but she had an ever-ready air about her. The other woman was more delicate, with long, flowing black hair. She wore a blue dress made from unmistakably high-quality material as well as quite a few accessories that were extravagant without being too gaudy.



Unlike the blonde, the dark-haired woman didn't look like a traveler at all. Anyone on the road in *that* getup was just asking to get jumped by bandits. Even if you were lucky enough to avoid such a fate, the hem of that nice, fancy dress would be in shreds from scraping along the road before two days were out.

"We've been waiting for you," the raven-haired woman said quietly. There was neither aggression nor warmth in her voice. It was an utterly businesslike greeting.

"Who are you? Well... I guess I don't have to ask," I replied, smiling wryly at my own question.

In appearance and presence, both women seemed human. But after being invited here by demons, we didn't need to guess too hard as to the true nature of our little welcome party.

"Who are they?" Gourry asked me from the side.

C'mon, man, work that brain of yours... Actually, never mind. Knowing Gourry, he'd probably say he thought it over and still couldn't figure it out.

"Think of us as something like receptionists," the raven-haired woman said, whether in response to me or Gourry, I couldn't say.

Receptionists? Not exactly the answer I expected...

"I'm sorry to say so after you came all this way, but we'll need the esteemed dragon lord and the esteemed elf to remain here," the blonde said in a strangely formal tone.

Wow. It was easy enough to peg Mephy, but the fact that these women could tell at a glance that Milgazia was a transformed golden dragon—also known as dragon lord—at a glance... *They must be pretty powerful, even as demons go.*

"The invitation was only meant for the esteemed Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev."

Heh... I let out a little snort. "Sorry, but do you really think we're gonna agree to split up? Why would we do that?"

"You are the only two who are invited. If the esteemed dragon lord and elf

will simply wait quietly, no harm will come to them.”

“All the more reason—”

“They’re not going to listen,” said Mephy as she and Milgazia stepped forward, inserting themselves protectively between us and the two ladies.

“No harm will come to us, hmm? That suggests that harm *will* come to the two humans.”

“I don’t know what you could possibly have against *these* humans, but I’m afraid we can’t let them accept your invitation.”

Hey, what’s with that emphasis? Seriously, Mephy! That might be even ruder than the blonde calling me “most esteemed.” Bitch.

“Hmm...” The blonde looked a bit troubled. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything more.”

By contrast, the dark-haired woman just seemed amused. “We should have just done this from the start,” she said, then snapped her porcelain-white fingers.

Suddenly, Milgazia and Mephy lurched away. No, it wasn’t just them... The two demons, and the very scenery around us, seemed to speed away from us.

“What?!” Gourry shouted in surprise from beside me.

He and I remained the same distance from each other. And obviously, it wasn’t like we’d suddenly started running backward or anything. It was a strange situation... but I had an inkling as to what was happening.

“Dimensional interference?!” I heard Milgazia gasp. He sounded close by, despite his figure growing ever more distant.

Indeed, I’d experienced something similar once while helping to resolve some family drama in Saillune. It wasn’t this dramatic, but I’d suddenly felt far away from the person in front of me and couldn’t catch up no matter how fast I ran. It was like something out of a dream. Then, the next thing I knew, I was tossed out into another dimension—a place that wasn’t anyplace in particular.

This was that same phenomenon in play. Gourry kept running in an attempt to reunite with the others, while I was standing still. Yet the two of us remained

side by side.

“I won’t let you get away with this!” I could see Mephy’s armor in the distance open into six white wings. *Vrmmmmm!* A sound like the buzzing of insects hummed low around us.

Then Milgazia spoke... no, howled in an inhuman incantation. The movement of the scenery around us slowed. But that was all. They were only slowly getting away from us now, but the momentum of the situation hadn’t reversed.

“Wh-What?!” Milgazia groaned in shock.

Only then did the reality of the situation hit me. The dark-haired woman was trying to use dimensional interference to drag me and Gourry into another dimension, and Milgazia and Mephy had tried to stop it.

Forcibly created pocket dimensions weren’t particularly stable. When I’d gotten dragged into one in Saillune, I’d escaped by summoning a pigeon. As long as you could create even the tiniest connection back to the world you came from, you could pop the dimension like a soap bubble and return.

But even Milgazia with his magic-enhancing gear and Mephy with her Zenafa Armor created by dragons and elves had failed to pop what should have been a highly unstable dimensional wall.

Worse yet, judging by how the two demons were acting, only the raven-haired woman was using any power. The blonde one was just watching her, looking mildly miffed.

“That was very reckless. Just a reminder, by the way—don’t hurt the dragon or the elf,” she said.

“Oh, that’s right. Those were our orders.” I could still hear both women’s voices. “Then I’d better finish the job...”

Then, suddenly and unceremoniously, all sound stopped. The sky above us opened into vastness. The greenery of the forest grew distant. The ground below us rapidly broadened at our feet.

Gourry and I were standing on an expansive, featureless plain.

“What?!” He took a few steps and came to a stop. He’d been running this

whole time, but he'd only just now made any actual movement forward. "What is all this?!" he asked in shock and confusion. "There's no place like this, even in Elemekia!"

He was right. There were no mountains around us, let alone forests or towns. It wasn't a desert, though. Just a flat sheet of ground. There wasn't a single blade of grass growing on it and no sign of life to be seen anywhere. I looked up and saw only the cloudless blue sky above. The air around us was steeped in a more concentrated version of that strange feeling I'd sensed hanging over the forest.

Even knowing it probably wouldn't work, I decided to try summoning a dove. And as expected, it just flew off into the empty sky overhead. *Yeah, figured that wouldn't work.* Which suggested that whoever created this dimension was far more powerful than the schemer in Saillune. Either that or they'd found some way to stabilize the space.

"What are you doing, Lina?! This is no time to be summoning doves! Struggle! Panic! Where the heck are we?!"

"Calm down, Gourry. We're in another dimension."

"Another dimension?!" Gourry shouted and looked around him again. "*Where?!*"

"Uh, well, it's..."

"You're still in Sairaag," answered a voice from beside me.

Gourry and I both whipped around in surprise. Standing where I'd sensed no presence whatsoever was a crimson figure. Aside from their color, his cape and hood were reminiscent of the grim reaper and he wore a white mask over where his face should be. The mask had no nose and no mouth, and for eyes... it had two sparkling rubies.

Don't tell me... I could feel sweat beading on my forehead.

"But although this is where Sairaag is located, we are in another world, separated by a paper-thin barrier. A temporary world I created for this purpose."

Don't tell me... you're... I tried to say the words, but they froze in my throat. I didn't want confirmation.

I couldn't detect any presence from the red figure at all. It wasn't concealing it, mind you; it simply blended naturally into the unusual air around us.

"This is... a world filled with magical power. Magic is a power that fundamentally should not exist in your world. But just as this world is separated from yours by a thin barrier, the barrier between it and other worlds is also exceptionally thin. Thus, magic permeates the air. Perhaps you felt it before... the magic power that brims forth from this world."

I see... so the strangeness I felt was concentrated magical power.

The red reaper continued, "In this world, woman, your blade of void shall not be so quick to extinguish. You shall have no need to chant spells, as you can activate them through sheer will and words of power. And you there, man. That sword of yours channels nearby magical energy to enhance its edge. Here, it should be able to wound me. In other words... you now have the power to defeat me."

"What... What the hell are you after?!" Gourry demanded.

"This is a ritual!" the red figure proclaimed, spreading its arms wide and revealing deep crimson robes beneath its cape. "Do you remember what I told you both when you defeated me once before?!"

I knew it! I heard a grinding sound. I could tell it was my own teeth.

"I told you we would never meet again! But it seems the age in which you live has seen fit to arrange our reunion! And thus, I must defeat you—as my first step toward turning the world to void! It would have been easy enough merely to kill you, but that would have no meaning. When I defeat you, who have the power to slay me... then and only then shall my authority be consummate as the king who would destroy a world. That is why I invited you here to this land, to this place. The residual miasma from the magical beast of old, the evil of Hellmaster, and the distortions left by the Golden Mother... I used it all to create this world."

"I see..." I eked out, actually managing to speak this time. "But that all seems

pretty petty for the so-called king of demons.”

“It is *because* I am the king that such ritual is important.”

Smoothly, the red figure took a step forward. Gourry and I reflexively took a step back.

“I don’t especially want to go along with this. I don’t see any upside for us,” I said.

“And yet, you must.” Slowly... Slowly but surely, a black hand appeared from beneath its red robe. It was holding something like a baton. “There *is* an upside for you. This world, which I created and I maintain... If you destroy me, it will break down and return you from whence you came. But that’s only if you can defeat me—Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu.”

Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu...

The demon who, in ancient times, fought Flare Dragon Ceifeed for the fate of the world. Whose body was then broken into seven pieces and sealed away. The Dark Lord of legend.

But... Gourry and I knew Shabranigdu was more than *just* a legend. Two years ago and change, we’d witnessed the awakening of one of his slumbering fragments.

“We shan’t ever meet again...”

There were only two people besides me and Gourry who knew that the Dark Lord had spoken those words. One was off on a journey somewhere. The other... was Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu himself. That meant the being in front of us now really had to be...

“Not that it matters, but couldn’t you at least give us a little warning before you drop in on us like this?!” I found myself snarking. Call it a gut reaction, even though my voice was shaking something awful. “I mean, we’ve got lives, we’ve got schedules. We could use a little emotional prep time!”

“Such things are irrelevant to me,” he said, then took another step forward. The Dark Lord was approaching. The fight was upon us.

Unable to bear the pressure anymore, Gourry and I leaped to the left and

right.

“Elemekia Lance!” I spoke those words of power. This opening spell wasn’t so much an attack as it was an attempt to confirm what the Dark Lord had said. And, indeed, my spell activated without a full incantation. What’s more, the spear of light I produced in midair was far brighter than normal. “Go!” When I shouted, the spear of light streaked toward the Dark Lord!

Thunk. The Dark Lord thrust the rod in his hand into the ground, producing a red gem the size of a human head on one end of it.

“Heh.” With that small breath, the Dark Lord swung the rod. The jewel at the end glowed faintly, and my lance of magical light broke into a mist that swiftly faded.

Of course. That stick... no, that staff...

Even as the Dark Lord moved, Gourry charged at him—silently, and with his sword drawn.

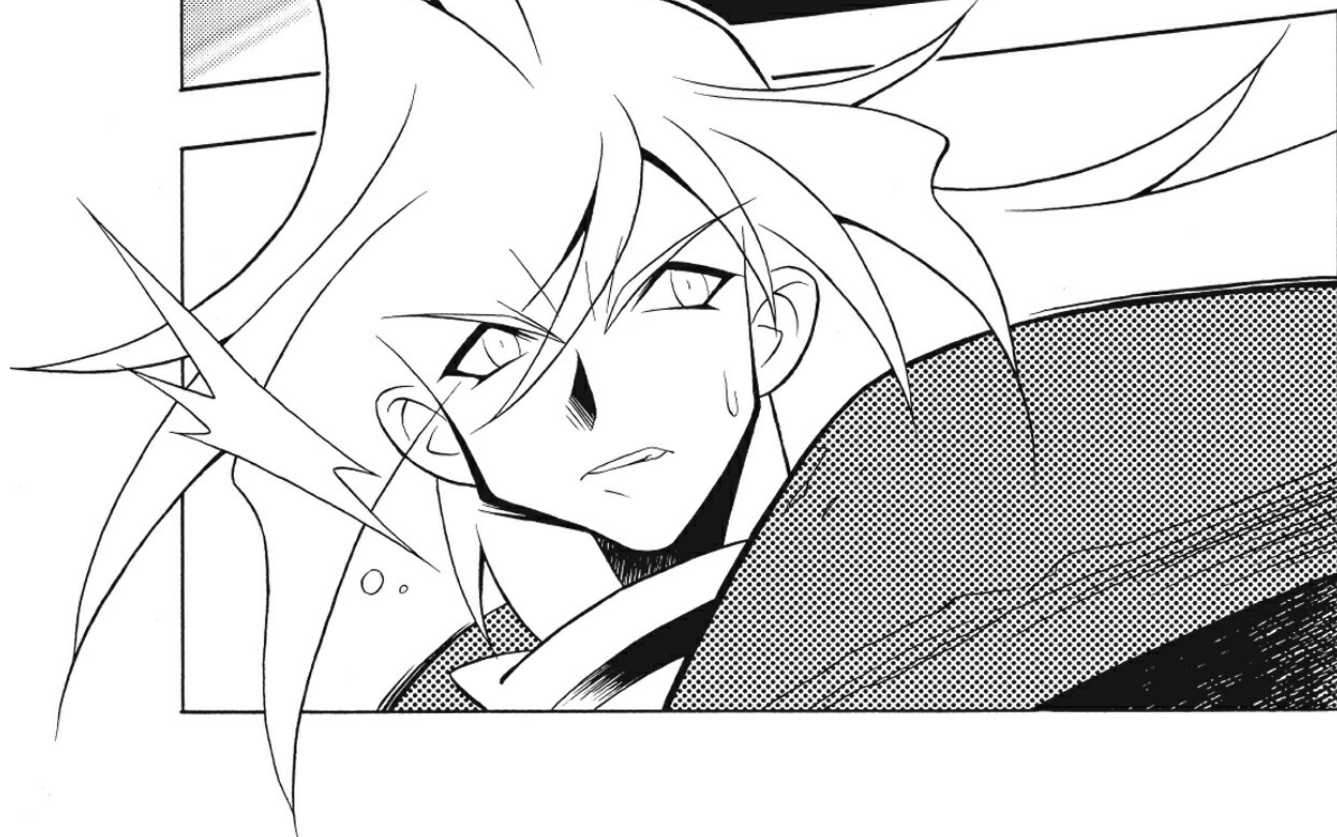
He’s fast!

But... *Zing!* The Dark Lord deflected Gourry’s sword, which could cut through magic itself, with his staff.

That thing must be... The Dark Lord’s demonic weapon, the Bone Staff, spoken of only in legend. It was probably an extension of him too, just as Dulgoffa was to General Sherra.

Using the momentum of his deflected sword, Gourry changed his stance and lashed out fast with another strike from a new direction. The Dark Lord’s staff continued its trajectory toward Gourry, unslowed and unaffected. Even if it looked like a staff, as the Dark Lord’s weapon, it had to have unspeakable destructive power behind it. What would happen if it struck a person?

Gourry must have had a similar thought, because he further changed the course of his blade to deflect the staff and leap back some distance.



All this transpired in the blink of an eye. Both fighters moved with incredible speed. Had I not received sword training from Gourry, their exchange just now would have looked like nothing more than a quick clash followed by a withdrawal to me. But being able to follow such a fight from a distance and physically being able to keep up with it were two totally different things. If I had to cross weapons with the Dark Lord myself, I'd probably be dead in a few moves.

The Dark Lord moved after the retreating Gourry. He then took a wide swing at the big lug.

That's nothing. Gourry can just leap back to— Just as I was thinking that, the wind of miasma—no, of magic itself—produced by the swing roared at Gourry!

“Ngh!”

Gourry leaped back further. The Dark Lord dashed forward in pursuit! He probably meant to strike Gourry as he landed, before he could regain his balance. But...

Not so fast! In that exact moment, while there was some space between Gourry and the Dark Lord, I could back him up!

Thump! I slammed my hand into the ground. “Astral Vine!” I recited a chant for a weapon enhancement spell—rather, simply the words of power. People normally used Astral Vines to imbue swords with the power to harm demons, but I'd cast this one directly on the ground.

Unable to grasp what I was up to, the Dark Lord momentarily shifted his attention to me.

When he did—*Thump!*—I slammed my other hand onto the ground. “Earth, heed my call! Dug Haute!”

Vwoosh! Responding to my command, the ground swelled up, forming countless spikes that surged toward the Dark Lord. These pillars of mundane dirt would never be able to harm a demon under ordinary circumstances. But right now? They were infused with the power of my Astral Vine!

“Tch!” The Dark Lord halted and brandished the Bone Staff. The jewel glowed

once more, and the magic-infused earthen spikes were smashed to pieces. Just then...

Bursting through the collapsing spikes, Gourry was on top of the Dark Lord once more! *Zing zing zing!* His sword flashed with white light that flew in a beeline for his foe. Caught unawares, the Dark Lord was forced back a bit. But...

Vrsh! Suddenly, a blackness wreathed the Dark Lord and expanded outward.

Gourry, ever vigilant, jumped away. In that same instant, a crimson figure leaped forward, tearing through the darkness! The tip of its outthrust staff met Gourry's sword and knocked it away with some kind of pressure!

A look of unguarded surprise appeared on Gourry's face, but he moved with the momentum of his deflected sword and let it carry him past his foe's staff. Then, with a series of leaps, he arrived back at my side.

Slowly, Shabranigdu turned back to face us. Gourry spoke to me quietly, his eyes still locked on the Dark Lord. "Lina! I want to get in close to him!"

"Got it!" I responded, slamming my hand to the ground once more. "Dug Haute!"

Bam! The earth between us and the Dark Lord ruptured into countless spikes, racing at the crimson figure once more! Ruby-Eye raised his staff, ready to meet them. Our line of sight on each other was broken by the rising dirt...

And I added one more! "Dug Haute!"

Crash! The ground around us swelled up like a tidal wave, surging toward the Dark Lord—with Gourry on top of it!

I wasn't sure if it was the result of a spell from the Dark Lord's staff or what, but my spikes and my wave of sand began to cave in before invisible globes. When they did, Gourry crested the sand tsunami... and jumped!

"What—" Gourry shouted in midair.

Hey! Don't call attention to yourself now, man!

The Dark Lord, after flattening my spikes and wave, raised his staff against Gourry once more.

Yet Gourry continued in anger, “—the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

For some reason... his cry seemed to make Ruby-Eye hesitate. *Slash!* The Dark Lord pulled back slightly, just as Gourry’s sword cut a silver afterimage through the air. He’d landed the hit, but it was a shallow one!

The Dark Lord placed his free hand over his face. Gourry came to a stop, standing perfectly still.

“I asked you what the hell you think you’re doing!” he bellowed, his voice filled with rage.

The Dark Lord didn’t move. Nor did he answer.

Gourry kept going. “You can’t change the way you fight that easily. Your swordplay is just the same as it was, not to mention the way you use darkness as a distraction and wreath your weapon in wind!”

“Hahh...” The Dark Lord’s shoulders slumped as he heaved a great sigh. He sounded tired... Exhausted, even. “Figured it out, huh? Thought maybe I’d gotten away with it. An’ I sure didn’t think *you* would be the one to see through me...”

I took in a small gasp. That voice... It wasn’t that of the Dark Lord. It was one I knew well. One Gourry knew well.

The crimson figure removed the hand covering his face. *Clunk.* The mask Gourry had split in two fell to the ground.

And in a voice barely above a whisper, I spoke his name.

“L... Luke?”

4: Demon Slayers

Rustle. The red cape and hood drifted up into the sky, carried by the wind. And before they could fall to the ground again, they blended into the air around them and vanished.

“Hey there. Gotta say, that stuffy old thing was makin’ it kinda hard to move right,” he whispered in his usual tone. As he spoke, the robe he’d been wearing morphed into light clothing and armor.

He now looked just like his old self with three key differences: the staff in his hand, the red cast to his clothing, and the fiery crimson color of his hair.

“Oh... this?” Perhaps noticing the direction of my gaze, he smiled abashedly and played with his hair with his free hand. “Yeah, I’m a natural redhead. I dyed it, since... y’know. She said she didn’t like red hair.” He sounded exactly like he always did, except for the air of quiet sorrow in his words. “But sheesh... You got me good, huh? I figured you might. You got good instincts an’ all. In fact, you saw through it so quick, it’s kinda makin’ the whole thing awkward.”

“What in the world...?” I muttered, straining out the words at last. My voice was barely audible. “What in the... What is...”

“Yeah... Guess I owe you the whole explanation, huh?” he said. He spoke haltingly, like a kid who’d been called out on a prank. “There was another me inside me, see? Not even I realized it was there... but I’m bettin’ you guys know what I mean, seein’ as you were there for Rezo Shabranigdu’s half-awakening and all.”

I said nothing in response. We... Gourry and I hadn’t really discussed those events with Luke and Mileena. He knew we’d defeated the Dark Lord, but he shouldn’t have known the identity of the host. The only beings who *would* were the seven parts of Ruby-Eye—pieces of the Dark Lord sundered millennia ago that shared a single consciousness. The other fragments.

Luke continued. “What makes me different from Rezo Shabranigdu is... I took

this on willingly. This... The guy who I am..." // "...and that which I am..." //

"...are united as one."

Two voices came out of his mouth in succession—Luke's voice, and that of the Dark Lord.

"You're kidding me," I found myself gasping hoarsely, my voice carried away by the wind. "But... you can see."

"See'? Oh, that's a whole misunderstandin'. Comin' from the name Ruby-Eye, I guess. The fragment wasn't sealed into Rezo's eyes or nothin'. It was deep inside his soul. The minute he ate the Philosopher's Stone—a shard of Demon Blood that amplifies and unleashes magical power—that freed it. In my case..." Luke started, then stopped with a heavy sigh. "It's just like you said," he started again, his solemn eyes on me. "The hatred just wouldn't go away, no matter what I did. I left Selentia hopin' to forget it all... But I just couldn't. The littlest things kept remindin' me. Y'know how they say time heals all wounds? Yeah, that's a load of crap."

For a moment, I saw in Luke's eyes a shadow of what I'd seen in Rubia's during our reunion in Atlas. She'd told me that she would never forget what she'd been through. But Rubia carried a burden of love and self-loathing inside of her... And Luke? His burden was hatred.

"I don't blame Ceres anymore, but the next thing I knew... I was blamin' all of humanity. The world itself." Luke was no longer looking at me. His eyes were fixed on something in the distance beyond. Something so far away that he could never reach it. "That's when I realized I had somethin' else sleepin' inside me. I joined with it willingly. And that's pretty much that."

"Why?" I sounded so dumbstruck that I hated myself for it.

"Luke," Gourry began quietly, his voice far steadier than mine. "What happened that day... A demon was behind it. Did you know that?"

"Yeah. Thinkin' back now, I'm bettin' that Zord guy only got messed up in the head when he fused with a demon too. But even knowin' that... Or maybe *because* I know it, I resent it all the more. I resent humanity for thinkin' up the whole crazy-ass demon fusion thing. And I resent demonkind—including that asshole Dynast—for cookin' up the whole damn scheme for his sneaky little

game.”

“Game?” I whispered.

Luke nodded. “Graushera told us he was just havin’ a meal, but everything’s been leadin’ up to somethin’ else. Just like what Fibrizo did a thousand years ago—usin’ war as a wake-up call for the soul of the Dark Lord sleepin’ inside someone out there. It was a pretty damn shoddy gamble, if you ask me. Barely even a plan.”

Ah... I see. So that’s what all this was about...

I finally felt like I understood everything. Why General Sherra had created a demon sword to corrupt human souls and left it lying around for people to find. Why she’d smiled in her final moments. It was because she’d been seeking a soul that couldn’t be corrupted by a mere General.

In other words, it was a ritual to locate the Dark Lord’s next host. And in Sherra’s final moments, she’d finally found it—someone who could hold the demon sword Dulgoffa without being consumed. She’d found Luke. With a triumphant smile, she’d conveyed that information to Dynast somehow... and then perished.

This whole charade was why Dynast Graushera had kicked up a commotion in Gyria City after we left. He was hoping to call us back. He’d then gone to the additional trouble of fusing someone we knew with a lower-ranked demon to send after us. To make the fight more painful. To use the angst and hatred that inspired to awaken the Dark Lord’s soul.

Thinking back—even discounting having Milgazia and Mephy on our side—the demonic attacks we’d suffered then were strangely lacking in intensity. At the time, I’d assumed the demons were just playing with us, but I was wrong. They were trying to use the heightened emotions that came with combat to awaken the Dark Lord in Luke’s soul.

They’d also known that their grand plan would all be for naught if they actually killed Luke in the process. But it’s not like demons knew how to fight humans while restraining themselves just enough *not* to kill. So they couldn’t hold back, but they also couldn’t kill... This, due to their nature, had weakened them. And as a result, we’d won that battle with the Dark Lord inside Luke still

fast asleep.

But when trouble went down in a different city, the death of his beloved had sparked his hatred. That tragedy, in a sense, wasn't wrought by demonic hands. Humans had awakened the soul of Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu.

"I blame humans. I blame demons. I blame this world where they coexist. I'm thinkin' if I can liberate my other self up north, together we can grind the world into dust."

His other self up north... By that, Luke meant the Shabranigdu slumbering in the Kataart Mountains, sacrificially sealed in ice by Aqualord during the Incarnation War a thousand years ago. The Dark Lord of the North.

If two of the Dark Lord's seven parts were active at once, it could indeed spell the end of the world.

"Demons crave destruction. After destroyin' everything else, we'll destroy ourselves, and soon, it'll be nothin' but chaos. That'll be my revenge against this world," Luke proclaimed.

"But this is the world that allowed you to meet Mileena, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yeah... You're right. That's true." He scratched at his head bashfully like he always used to. "That's why... I dunno what to do anymore. I mean, I like you guys. There's plenty more good people out in the world. But the fact remains there's awful ones too. Besides, I hate this world now. So I'm at a loss. That's why I called you guys here an' created this place where you could kill me. I was hopin' you'd help me find the answer... Is it the world that oughta be destroyed, or me?"

"You can't be serious," I rasped, averting my eyes. "You expect us to just go along with this?"

At last I understood why the supposedly neutral Xellos had shown up to get rid of Bradu. To fulfill his demonic purpose, the unflappable Priest couldn't let me and Gourry meet the newly resurrected Dark Lord. If, by some small chance, the Dark Lord were slain by humans, then the demons' ultimate goal—the destruction of the world—would've taken a massive step backward. Gourry and I represented that "small chance," so their best bet would have been to kill us

before we arrived here.

But Xellos was probably curious. He knew that the Dark Lord's new host was one of our comrades. When we found out we had to fight Luke, how would Gourry and I react? I figured *that* was why Xellos had insisted on his neutrality.

Seriously... what a jerk, am I right?

"I'm sorry. I really am," offered Luke.

"I don't want your damned apologies!" I shouted. "Okay, so what? The one sending Xellos and those weird demons after us, not to mention my doppelgänger... Was that all you?!"

"To tell ya the truth, I wanted to go get you myself. But you guys got such good instincts that I knew you'd figure me out too soon. Plus, if we traveled together again, it only woulda made it harder to fight you now. Never thought you'd peg me just from my fightin' style, though... Anyhow, that's why I had to get someone else to guide you here. Y'know the black-haired lady at the 'entrance'? I left the details to her. But the other me frozen in Kataart... I don't think he wanted me meetin' up with you. I mean, bein' trapped in ice an' all, he kinda has trouble expressin' himself, but the feelin'—the sense of his desire—got through. That caused some confusion among the small fry. Some figured the frozen dude's will was more important and so they decided to try to stop you guys, while others heeded me when I told 'em to get you guys here in one piece. That's how things got kinda messy. Though I guess you ended up makin' it safe an' sound in the end..."

"Safe and sound, my ass," I whispered. Then I realized something. "Wait a minute. Speaking of safe and sound, who were those receptionists of yours? They seemed pretty powerful. Are Milgazia and Mephy okay?"

"Yeah, they'll be fine. Like I said, the frozen dude's got communication issues, and he don't feel so threatened by those two. So I ordered my girls to just leave 'em alone, drag you two into this world, then close the entrance and leave. I'm bettin' old dad-joke dragon and picky-eater elf are just kinda confused right around now." A mischievous grin, achingly familiar, crossed his face.

"Well, that's nice and all, but—"

“So,” Gourry interrupted, “the low-level demons spawning in huge numbers and the strange weather we saw... Did you make all that happen?”

“I wouldn’t say I *made* it happen, exactly,” Luke replied with a shrug. “But those little guys... Just me awakenin’ made ’em all stronger, and they really started cuttin’ loose. I didn’t feel obligated to stop ’em, so I just left ’em to it. That’s all. As for the weather... I guess that’s on account of me buildin’ this world here, maybe? I wasn’t really thinkin’ too hard about it.”

“I see...” Gourry’s voice echoed as he trailed off.

“Now...” It was Luke who broke the silence. “You guys ready to get started?”
I gulped.

I’d known... Yeah, I knew damn good and well that it would come to this. This was what Luke had summoned us for, after all. It was a ritual to him—a ritual to sever his last connection to our world. He’d said he liked us. That he wanted us to fight. Either we would die by his hands, or we would bury him ourselves. Whatever happened, he’d be bidding the world goodbye.

“Luke...”

“Look, there ain’t no changin’ things now,” he said. There was sorrow in his voice, and a hint of liberation.

“You’ve got to be kidding me! You can’t spring this on us out of nowhere... Did you think we’d just go, ‘Oh, yeah, sure’?! There’s... There’s got to be some other way! Isn’t there *something* we can do?!”

“Look, I don’t believe in fate or nothin’. If someone told me ‘this is what destiny decided,’ I’d laugh in their face and try to find a way out just like you are now. If the Dark Lord was tryin’ to force my hand, I’d fight him for all I was worth too. But this ain’t foreordained, and no one made me do it... It was my choice, plain and simple. I’m gonna fight you and get my answer. Of course, I can’t make you fight if you don’t wanna. I’ll send you back to where you came from... then I’ll free the Dark Lord of the North and destroy the world. Maybe I’ll run into you again in the process. But when that happens, we’ll be enemies and nothin’ more. So, what’ll it be?”

“What’ll it be...?” There was no way I could answer that. There was no way I

could fight Luke to the death just because he asked for it either. But if we refused, then he'd make good on his word and set about destroying the world. It was a terrible ultimatum. "This is absurd! You're forcing Gourry and me into an impossible decision! I don't agree to any of this! There... There's got to be some other way! Your hatred of the world... That has to be the Dark Lord inside of you too!"

"Nah, it ain't," Luke said, shaking his head. "At the end of the day, I welcomed the Dark Lord into me. But even without him, my hatred of the world burned strong. I know that much. This is my will, no one else's. Even if there was a way to separate me and the Dark Lord and you managed to pull it off, it wouldn't change how I feel. If the Dark Lord was manipulating me, I don't think I'd have called you here and challenged you to a duel in the first place. I woulda gone straight to awaken the guy up north and get busy destroyin' the world. In other words, yeah... What's happenin' here right now is all me."

"But..."

"This is how it's gotta be. It's the only way to stop these feelings."

"Fine," Gourry said quietly at length. "I'll play along."

"Gourry?!" I found myself shouting. "Hang on! Don't you realize what's going on here?!"

"I do," he said, looking at me with kind eyes. "And I wouldn't play along if it was predestined or the Dark Lord's will either. But... this is the choice Luke made for himself, right? So I don't think he'll back down, no matter what we say. He knows his mind better than anyone, and he's the only one who can change it. Which means we've got two options: Do we play along, or don't we? It's gotta be one or the other. And since Luke is the one asking, I figure... why not play along? Obviously, I don't *want* to fight him. But if I say I'm not gonna do it and he can go on his way... I feel like we'd be the ones leaving things up to fate and other people."

"I..." At this, I fell silent.

"Besides, even if he does send us back, until the demons attack us or someone else does something to stop him, we'd be worried about this until the day we died. I'm not living like that. Plus, I'm also your guardian, so I can't leave

your safety down to luck. So... while I still have the chance to do something about this, I'm gonna. If you can't take it, Lina, you can stay out of it. I'm going to do this, even if I have to do it alone." Gourry spoke plainly, his gaze focused on Luke. I could see a determined light in his eyes.

"That's not fair, Gourry," I whispered heavily. "When you put it like that, I can't just say, 'Okay, go for it. Good luck. It's none of my business, so do whatever you want.'"

For my future and Gourry's... For the futures of everyone we'd ever met, I couldn't just leave this up to chance either. I knew that if there really was some kind of "destiny" at play and I was going to try to change it somehow, it had to be now. The sorrow, hatred, and angst of losing the person you loved most... If this truly was the only way to free Luke's heart of that burden, then...

"Okay," I said, looking at Luke with a wincing smile. "I'll play along with your selfish little game."

"Sorry 'bout this."

"It's okay, really. But just so you know—when I play, I play hard."

To fight a friend with everything I have... To swallow my true feelings...

"Sorry." Luke winced right back at me, a white mask appearing in his hand. It was slightly different than the one before. The shining jewels in the eyes weren't the deep crimson of the Dark Lord, but the sepia color of Luke's own. He affixed the mask firmly to his face, then turned its visage toward Gourry. "It'd probably be too hard for you if I used my old face. But a word of warning... I won't be holdin' back like I did in Selentia."

"Right."

"Neither will we."

He nodded and took a few steps back. The staff in his hands changed shape, becoming a sword with a red jewel in the hilt. And then, in the Dark Lord's voice, he announced the start to the battle... "Let us begin."

He's given us the power to defeat him. I switched my mind over to battle mode, silenced my emotions, and ran some quick mental calculus.

Based on what Luke had said, Gourry's Blast Sword could channel nearby magic into its edge. That gave him the option of using this dimension's naturally bountiful magic power or Luke's own magic against him. As for me, I could activate spells here without an incantation. My sword of void, the Ragna Blade, would also last longer than usual.

Numbers-wise, this was a two-on-one fight, but we hardly had the advantage. Gourry's swordplay was normally superior to Luke's, as was my spellcasting, both in terms of sheer power and repertoire. But after fusing with the Dark Lord, Luke was a match for Gourry's physical prowess as well as my magic. That meant our victory was contingent on our teamwork—and spell choice.

I already knew spells that drew upon the Dark Lord's power wouldn't work on his incarnations. That was common sense to anyone who'd ever studied a bit of sorcery. But it begged a certain question... Would power borrowed from the Dark Lord's *lieutenants* work on him? Even with heightened power due to the magic-rich nature of this dimension, it was hard to imagine. Elemental spells never worked on pure demons either, so they were out. That left astral-type shamanistic magic... and spells that called upon the power of the void.

Giga Slave was one such spell that invited the Lord of Nightmares into me, and it was off-limits. Luke had said this world was only separated from ours by a paper-thin layer, and that the entire place was steeped in magic power. In other words, even if I used the imperfect Giga Slave here, there was a very real chance of my body being taken over. And unlike Hellmaster, the Dark Lord probably wouldn't do something so foolish as to mistake her for me and attack.

That left me with my sword of void, the Ragna Blade. But it had one fatal flaw—I had to get in close to use it.

I could probably maintain the usually short-duration Ragna Blade for quite a while here, but its range was still that of a basic sword. It'd be useless if I couldn't get in close enough to land a strike. Plus, my swordplay was pretty middling. I didn't stand a chance against someone on Gourry's level. Was it even possible for me to land an attack on Luke? That was the question. If I tried and things went wrong, I'd be dead on the spot.

Did that mean our best shot at victory... really lay with Gourry, then? At the

very least, I felt it was best for him to be the one in melee while I offered support at range.

I quickly decided on my tactics during the brief stare-down. Then, as if he'd been waiting for that, Luke—no, the Dark Lord made his move.

As the Dark Lord took off in a run, Gourry charged to intercept him. I began chanting a spell as was my usual habit... And the Dark Lord disappeared!

Blinking through space?! Then he'll reappear... I instinctively turned around to find the red figure right in front of me! *Damn it! Wait, this makes perfect sense. He knows he'll be at an advantage engaging me in close combat and keeping Gourry at a distance! How could I not have seen this?!*

In the span of an instant, several things happened. "Elemekia...!" I began to unleash my words of power, but the red figure was gone.

Blinking again? No... He'd used footwork at point-blank range to get around into my blind spot. And even though I couldn't see him, I knew without a doubt that he was about to swing his blade. The smell of death was upon me, thicker than I'd ever sensed it.

"Not so fast!" Gourry howled.

The big lug raised his sword high. Obviously, he was too far away to strike. I assumed he meant to throw the blade—a risky bet, if you asked me. And yet... the smell of death vanished. I realized immediately what had happened. The Dark Lord had guessed what Gourry was up to, and rather than take his chances against a master swordsman, he'd chosen to back off.

With that realization, I whipped around. "...Lance!"

The moment I turned, I fired my spell at the red figure. He used the sword in his hand to slice through it. *Crash!* There was a flash of light. In that instant, I leaped back.

The red figure tore through the flash, closing in on me. I jumped back again... as another figure streaked past me from behind! *Gourry!*

Zing! His sword, capable of cutting through magic, clashed with the Dark Lord's blade, causing the very air of the pocket dimension to tremble. They

exchanged blows in the blink of an eye.

The lingering smell of death still loomed over me, but I snapped myself out of it to focus on the battle unfolding. Strike. Slash down. Slash up. Dodge. Deflect. Press. The two fighters swapped places at blinding speeds as they traded blows. And the instant they broke apart...

“Bepheth Bring!”

The earth spell I unleashed removed the ground beneath the Dark Lord’s feet. It was like opening up a hole under him. This would’ve left most people fatally vulnerable, dumping them down below... but the Dark Lord immediately seemed to begin floating. He wasn’t shaken in the slightest, as if he hadn’t even noticed the ground disappearing underneath him.

That’s when Gourry moved in. Even if the Dark Lord was floating to avoid falling, having nowhere to plant his feet should put him at a disadvantage in a direct swordfight.

Zing! Clang! Clash!

However, greatly betraying my expectations, the Dark Lord found sure footing in the empty air as he tangled with Gourry. Their blades clashed again and again, with the Dark Lord slowly being driven back. Gourry continued to move forward until he reached the edge of the hole I had made. Not even my boy here could walk on nothing.

“Whew!” Instead, with a sharp exhale, Gourry leaped back and out of the clash.

The Dark Lord also retreated, and—*Fwash!*—he began emanating a concealing darkness. I didn’t know if it was dangerous or not, but Gourry drew back even further out of an abundance of caution. The inky something-or-other then began to coalesce in five places... and suddenly, five Dark Lords formed before us.

A diversion?! Only one of them was probably real. The other four were just decoys made of... whatever that black stuff was. But decoys or not, they were creations of the Dark Lord. There was no telling how powerful they were. Writing them off was reckless. Regardless, all I could do was try to thin their

numbers!

“Zellas Bullid!” This time, I used a spell borrowing power from Greater Beast Zellas Metallium. I didn’t have high hopes that it would work on the Dark Lord himself, but I thought it might be a nifty way to smash his toys.

I visualized the spell splitting into five. More precisely, I mentally rewrote the chant and applied it to my visualization. It was easy to alter incantations, just like you would when splitting a single flaming bolt into multiple arrows. Of course, in the real world, it was impossible to split the Zellas Bullid. In this world where magic was very dense, however, it was worth a shot...

But despite my efforts, I only produced a single beam of light. It pierced through one of the inky Dark Lords and then turned it to mist. *A decoy!*

Just then, the remaining four descended on Gourry. In a tangle like that, anything I fired risked hitting him. The Dark Lords’ black swords all swung for Gourry at once...

“Not gonna work!” *Vavavroosh! Zing!* Gourry’s sword sliced through three of the Dark Lords instantly, then parried the sword of the fourth. “The shadows are slower!”

“In that case...” The still-black Dark Lord shoved Gourry’s sword away, then split into three figures that all struck at Gourry!

“Still too slow!” Gourry howled and cut the two new decoys in half. But when he did—*Fwoom!*—they exploded!

It wasn’t a particularly large blast, but it was enough to set Gourry off his balance. It must not have been magical in nature either, because the Dark Lord stood there unfazed as he raised his sword aloft!

Gourry!

The Dark Lord swept at Gourry around thigh-level. As the explosion surged, Gourry—realizing he wouldn’t be able to fully dodge the strike—used the force of the blast to dive away and get his distance. He rolled along the ground a few times and went to get up again. His leg buckled and he fell to one knee.

The Dark Lord really got him?! He was a sitting duck if the Dark Lord moved in

to finish the job...

“Dynast Blas!” So I unleashed my spell!

Lightning crackled around the Dark Lord... But with one swing of his sword, he deflected it toward Gourry! The big lug tried to use his arms to get away, but —*Crackle!*—the raging lightning consumed him!

Thud. I heard the terrible sound of something heavy hitting the ground.

“Gourry! Gourry!” I cried, but his body only twitched in response.

“He isn’t dead,” the Dark Lord said casually.

I should’ve known... Our teamwork made things difficult for the Dark Lord, so he’d acted like he was after me to corner Gourry and deny us time to coordinate.

“He isn’t dead, but he lies grievously injured. You might be able to save him if you can defeat me and return to your world for treatment swiftly enough. But if you don’t... Do you understand?”

He’s going to die...? My lungs contracted as the thought flashed through my mind. *I won’t let that happen... ever!*

“A one-on-one duel... with a time limit, then.” My voice was so quiet, it surprised even me.

Slowly, the Dark Lord approached.

“Let’s do this!” I brought my hands together. “Elemekia Lance!”

Vwing! I unleashed my spear of light. The Dark Lord didn’t even try to dodge it. He took it head-on without batting an eye.

“Please. You didn’t expect that to hurt me, did you?”

“As if! That was just a little test!” I said, bringing my hands together again. “Blood of the Lords of the four worlds, grant me magic beyond mine!” At the call of this abridged incantation—rather, these chaos words—the Demon Blood talismans began glowing. The gems of the Dark Lords of four worlds—Ruby-Eye, Dark Star, Chaotic Blue, and Death Fog—shone in their distinctive colors, amplifying my magical power. Then... “Elemekia Lance!”

The Dark Lord took the hit head-on once more. "I see... A worthy test. That was indeed stronger," he said lightly.

Ugh, so annoying! In that case...

"Zellas Bullid!" I fired an amplified beam of light, which he easily dispersed with a swing of his sword.

"You can assume you have only one shot," said the Dark Lord, still walking toward me. "And that's to cut me down with your blade of void. Basic spells won't work on me. But with that, you could cleave through both me and my sword. However..."

"Dynast Blas!"

Crackle, crackle! The magical lightning enveloped him, but he swept it aside with yet another casual swing of his sword.

"I have foreknowledge of this fact," the Dark Lord continued.

I know this won't work, but... "Freeze Bullid!"

The ice spell I unleashed encased the Dark Lord in a big block of ice. I hoped it would hold him in place, but he passed through it like it wasn't even there.

I knew it... Even if the effects of magic are stronger, the basic principles remain the same. Elemental shamanistic magic won't work on demons in this dimension either. I moved back quickly.

"Thus shall I evade your sword and strike, and in our duel be victorious. Will you strike true, or miss your mark? You have but one chance to see it through."

I continued to back away as the Dark Lord continued to press toward me. He didn't seem in a hurry to close the distance between us. It was like... he was waiting for me to work up the nerve.

"You want a big dramatic showdown, huh? How manly of you! Too bad I'm a woman!" I yelled, the gears of my mind turning at light speed. The gamble the Dark Lord had proposed was one with terrible odds for me. It would have to be my absolute last resort. Actually, given the discrepancy in our abilities, it was less a gamble and more an act of utter desperation... Wasn't there some other way?

How about this?!

“Ra Tilt!” This spell wasn’t in my standard repertoire. High-level magic required not just incantations and hand gestures, but a certain degree of visualization, and I had a hard time conceiving spells like Ra Tilt. But...

Vwsh! I managed to unleash it. The pillar of pale blue light wreathed the Dark Lord... until he dismissed it with another swing of his sword.

“I commend you for mustering a spell that is normally beyond you... Yet it is nigh harmless against me.”

That didn’t work either?! Still, one thing was clear to me now. The Dark Lord had used his sword to sweep away spells like Zellas Bullid, Dynast Blas, and even that Ra Tilt. This behavior suggested to me that he didn’t want to be hit with them. But whether they would hurt him a little or a lot... I didn’t know.

This left me with two strategies. I could either hit him with an instakill spell like Ragna Blade or wear him down with multiple hits from ones like Zellas Bullid. Unfortunately, neither was particularly realistic. It’d be hard to get him with the Ragna Blade, and he wasn’t gonna just sit around and take it while I chained Zellas Bullids on him.

Other than that... there was the powerful healing spell Resurrection, which I couldn’t normally use. It would certainly fix Gourry up, but that was out too. It would take time to use, and the Dark Lord definitely wasn’t gonna give me that. Even with the amplification of the Demon Blood talismans in a dimension steeped with magic power, the Dark Lord was overwhelmingly—

...

I stopped in place. It was just an idle thought, but it was worth trying before I went all-in with Ragna Blade.

“You’ve steeled yourself, then?” he asked.

The Dark Lord was about to dash at me, when... *Clink!* I bit down on the talisman on my left arm—the blue Demon Blood jewel!



The stone that had seemed as hard as a rock, for some reason, simply burst in my mouth and disappeared. The Dark Lord had said a Demon Blood talisman was essentially a complete Philosopher's Stone—an incredible amplifier of magical power.

“Ruler of another realm, Chaotic Blue!” What left my mouth wasn't an incantation. Just a plea spoken in chaos words. “In exchange for thy bloodstone, reveal to me thy might!”

“What?!” the Dark Lord exclaimed in shock.

If this world was separated from ours by a hair's breadth, then it was only as far away from other worlds too.

Roarr! The sky above me filled with light. Waves of it expanded like ripples on the surface of a pond, and a pale blue pillar shot down at the Dark Lord.

“Graaaaah!” The soundless pressure brought a scream from his lips. His crimson figure was bathed in the shining light, and...

“Aaaaah!” Then a crimson flash forced the light back into the blue of the sky! The sky calmed, and the Dark Lord remained standing. “A spell... from a Dark Lord of another world?”

That one got him good! I can tell! In that case...

“Ruler of another realm, Death Fog!” This time, I used the white jewel on my left arm. “In exchange for thy bloodstone, reveal to me thy might!”

Bwsh! The air around the Dark Lord turned white with a substance that really did look like fog. *Vrrrrsh!* The fog swirled and the air howled, tearing through the Dark Lord of our world.

“Raaaaah!” He let out a cry of exertion. Or was it pain?

Crick! The soft sound of something breaking followed, and then... *Fwish!* With a sound like a splash upon water, the white fog dispersed. The Dark Lord stumbled one step forward. Faint but visible cracks appeared along the magic sword in his hand.

I grabbed the talisman from my belt and put the black jewel in my mouth. “Ruler of another realm, Dark Star! In exchange for thy bloodstone, reveal to

me thy might!”

Vrumm... The air around us let out a low hum. Darkness manifested, suddenly expanding and contracting with the red figure inside! It sucked in even his voice as it shrunk into an infinitesimally small point. Into nothingness.

Then, without a sound, the dark point burst. Unsteadily, the crimson Dark Lord regained his footing. He really seemed to be hurting, but I had only one talisman remaining. And it belonged to him—Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu, Dark Lord of our world. That wasn’t going to do much for me, which didn’t leave me with much to go on...

...

Actually, I had my answer. Maybe I’d had it all along. In fact, I think I had.

“Is that it?” The Dark Lord looked toward me. Countless hairline cracks had formed in his mask. There was little vigor in his voice now. “Then the time has come for us to settle things... Have at you!” the Dark Lord howled and took off in a dash.

My three hits had significantly slowed him, but he was still closing in fast. I braced myself and faced him.

Not yet... Not yet! The distance between us narrowed. The Dark Lord’s hand, wrapped around his sword hilt, moved ever so slightly. *Now!*

“Ragna...” I raised my right hand high! “...Blaaaaaaade!”

My black sword cut through empty air. The Dark Lord had leaped back in the nick of time to dodge the strike, but he immediately leaped back at me. I swept my right hand to the side, twisted my body with the momentum... and swung the black sword in my *left* hand!

“A second blade?!” the Dark Lord cried in surprise.

Our red and black streaks crossed. *Nrrrm!* I felt no resistance at all as mine moved forward, but the only thing my blade of void cut through was the blade in the Dark Lord’s hand!

“I have won,” he declared as he pulled back. His blade regenerated itself before my eyes.

I ducked down and popped the talisman on my chest into my mouth.

Thou who art blacker than darkness...

The Demon Blood burst between my teeth—Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu’s Demon Blood.

Thou who art redder than blood...

I held my hands up, extinguishing my two blades of void.

Ruby-Eye, buried in the flow of time...

A red glow appeared in my palms.

“Dragon Slave!”

Roooooar! My crimson blast consumed the Dark Lord. Red radiance scorched the land of the unknown world.

A small sigh drifted from my lips, and then... a figure appeared as the flames dimmed. I’d seen the same sight once before. *Déjà vu.*

“Surely, you must know...” Dancing over the bellowing of the wind, the Dark Lord’s voice reached me. “A spell that borrows my own power cannot work on me...”

Indeed, I knew that. It never would have worked—under ordinary circumstances.

“So why did you do it? And why...” The Dark Lord’s form emerged from the swirling flame. “Why... am I dying?”

Because... I fell to my knees.

The red color that painted the Dark Lord’s body was already fading, and the sword he was using to support himself was breaking apart in his hands.

“I think you know the answer,” I replied. The winds whipped around my hair and cape. “A spell that calls upon the Dark Lord’s power would never work against the Dark Lord... It’s idiocy to ask for your help to kill you, right? Unless...” After all I’d done, I felt a cry leak from my lips. But I choked it back and kept talking. “What if you yourself wished for death?”

A gust of wind blew.

“Ah... gotcha.” The voice that drifted by me then wasn’t the Dark Lord’s, but Luke’s. He sounded deeply exhausted but at peace. “Yeah, I guess I just... I just wanted to go where she was. And for you guys to send me there.” He sat down on the ground. “Y’know, back at the temple... when Mileena asked for you to leave us alone... she told me... She said, ‘Don’t hate people.’”

Another gust blew, carrying his words.

“But I just... couldn’t stop.” His voice grew fainter and fainter. “Sorry...”

Who was that apology meant for?

A final gust of wind blew. He turned into sand, which began to collapse. And then... the world he’d created was gone.

I heard a knock.

“It is I,” announced Milgazia.

“Oh?” Gourry tried to sit up, but I stopped him.

“It’s open,” I called without turning around.

After all was said and done, me and the injured Gourry had reappeared in the center of Sairaag City. Well, I call it a city, but it was more like a small town, still in the process of rebuilding. Fortunately, Gourry wasn’t as bad off as I’d feared, so we’d gotten a room at an inn and set about treating him.

It was now the next day. I was sitting in a chair next to the bed where Gourry was convalescing, and I’d just finished explaining exactly what had gone down after he’d collapsed when I heard the door open and felt two presences enter. I didn’t have to look to know it was Milgazia and Mephy.

“Excuse me! How could you just disappear like— Wait, are you injured?!” demanded Mephy from over my shoulder.

“He’s all patched up now. He’s just on bed rest to be safe,” I responded.

“What happened?” Milgazia asked hesitantly.

There was a period of silence before I answered in kind, “We... defeated the Dark Lord. That’s all.”

“What?!” they both gasped.

“Truly?” Milgazia inquired further.

“Why would I lie?” I replied wearily.

“If it’s true,” Mephy said, stunned, “that’s incredible. You two really are... the demon slayers!”

“You think I want a stupid title like that?” I spat.

Another period of silence followed.

“We’ll take a room at this inn as well,” Milgazia eventually said rather meekly. “Once things calm down, I’d like to hear the whole story. Let’s go, Mephy.”

“Ah... right.”

Clack. The door closed, and I could feel their presences recede.

“Lina,” Gourry whispered, gazing at me. I was expecting him to chide me for my behavior. “Are you crying?” he asked instead.

“I think it’s perfectly obvious that I’m not.”

“Actually, it’s perfectly obvious that you are.”

“I think you need your eyes checked...” I started, then stopped. “Sorry. Yeah, I’m crying.”

“Just lashing out, huh?”

“It only just hit me. We never learned Luke and Mileena’s full names... And the thought of that just made me... suddenly...”

“Hey, it’s okay to cry.” Gourry gently reached for my cheek. “Even if it was what Luke wanted, it doesn’t change the fact that we killed him. But... no matter how heavy the burdens we carry, being human means we have to keep moving forward. Rubia’s working on that right now. Luke couldn’t beat it. But Lina, knowing you... I think that you can. And to make sure you can, for now... It’s okay. It’s okay to cry.”

“Stupid...”

Darn it... How come this idiot is so steadfast at the weirdest times?

And so, for just a little while... I cried.

“I think it’s about time we went our separate ways. Well, Mephy?”

“Yes. I agree, Uncle.”

This completely unexpected declaration came on an afternoon just a few days later. Gourry had completely recovered and eaten his usual portion at lunch (green peppers nicely removed), and we were now out on Sairaag’s main thoroughfare.

Well, I call it a thoroughfare, but again... still a small town, still rebuilding. The road itself was wide enough, but the houses along it were sparse and so were the people. Still, it had that unique energy of a city on the mend.

When you lose something, you have to do more than just grieve. To create a better tomorrow, eventually, you have to start walking again. Humans are tremendously resilient creatures.

“You’re leaving? That’s pretty sudden... Where to?” I asked.

“Gonna hibernate?” Gourry slipped in there.

“...”

“Aaaaah, sorry, sorry! I won’t say anything else.” Gourry frantically waved his hands in apology as Milgazia silently advanced on him.

Hang on, Gourry... Did you do that on purpose?

Milgazia withdrew and set his eyes on me instead. “Though the cause is resolved, the large number of spawned demidemons haven’t simply vanished,” he said with his usual stoicism. Of course, I’d explained the whole incident over the course of the last few days. “Mephy and I are going to continue traveling for a while and clear the last of them up.”

“And besides, we’ve learned there are quite a few very nasty demons lurking around. There’s Xellos, not to mention those two women,” Mephy added, then turned to Milgazia. “By the way, who were they? They seemed quite powerful...”

“You didn’t recognize them, Mephy?” he responded with surprise.

“You did, Uncle?”

“Not precisely, but they were most likely Greater Beast Zellas Metallium, and Deep Sea Dolphin.”

Bwuh?! Mephy and I both did a spit take at how casually he said that.

“I sensed power from them even greater than that of Xellos. And as far as demons more powerful than Xellos go... they’re really the only possibilities.”

“Really? If that’s the case, they’re pretty impressive receptionists...” I muttered.

“I’m... impressed that we survived,” Mephy added.

“Indeed. I suspect we wouldn’t have been so lucky had we made any further attempt to interfere. Fortunately, they disappeared immediately after stealing you away, but it makes me tremble just thinking back on it.”

Actually, you’re looking pretty stone-faced right now. You sure you’re scared?

“At any rate, this is our intent. Perhaps, humans, we shall meet again one day,” he concluded.

“Sure thing. Take care...”

Then, with almost anticlimactic ease, Milgazia and Mephy turned away and departed.

“They left, just like that,” I whispered.

“I think they’re relieved,” Gourry responded, watching them go.

“Relieved?”

“Yeah.” Gourry plopped a hand down on my head. “That you’re feeling better. They’re relieved enough that they can go take care of other business now.”

“Did I really seem that depressed?”

“A little, I think,” Gourry said, looking from me back to the road. Milgazia and Mephy were already out of sight. “Well, then... What do we do next?”

“Good question. We don’t really have another obvious objective. Actually, how about you decide for yourself for once instead of leaving it to me, Gourry?!

Go ahead! Have an opinion!”

“Hmm, okay. Let’s see...” Gourry stared straight into my eyes. “How about taking me to meet your family?”

“Uh?” I felt my heart skip a beat and quickly averted my eyes. “Er, Gourry... Do you even understand the implications of what you just asked?”

“Yeah... I do.” His voice was terribly gentle.

“Huh...?” I trembled a little again. I could tell I was blushing deeply.

Gourry continued softly, “You said once that Zephilia’s famous for its grapes, right? I think they’re in season right now.”

“You just want food?!” I shouted with lightning speed as I bashed him with the slipper I pulled out.



“What, you don’t like grapes?”

“It’s not that! I just... Arrrgh, fine! Whatever!”

“Zephilia it is, then.”

“How do you figure?!”

“Because you said we’d go where I wanted.”

“Oh, come on...”

“Besides, I think it’s good to visit home every now and then.”

Jeez... Although, the guy kinda had a point. He was being weirdly pushy this time too. Was he doing it on purpose...?

“Okay, fine. We’ll go see my family. To Zephyr City, capital of Zephilia! Okay?”

“Right!”

And so, Gourry and I set off walking side by side.

I had a feeling we’d get wrapped up in plenty more adventures on our way. We’d meet people. We’d lose some. We might even go through another tragedy like this one. But... I wouldn’t close my eyes to the sadness and the pain. I’d embrace them, and I’d overcome them.

I would always face tomorrow with a smile.

Slayers: The End

Afterword

Scene: The Author and L

Au: At last, we've reached the final book! With "The Demon Slayers," the *Slayers* novel series comes to an end!

L: Starting this time next week, the emotional Dark Lord comedy "Tokidoki☆Konton Magical L-rin" begins— Au: It will not. Never ever.

L: Grr! At least let me say the whole thing!

S: He's terribly rude, isn't he? He can't treat you that way, L-sama.

Au: Er, what's he doing here?

L: Well, since it's the afterword of the finale, I decided to bring out Subordinate S.

S: Hahaha. L-sama, you're so generous and beautiful.

Au: Um...

L: These *Slayers* novels wouldn't have been possible without you, Subordinate S, so I thought I'd give you a chance to speak here at the end.

S: Thank you so much. But of course, I exist only at your radiant pleasure, L-sama! Thus I feel it is no exaggeration to say that you are the true protagonist of the *Slayers* novels! In fact, I think that could be their deepest, greatest moral truth!

Au: Um...

L: Gosh, you're making me blush. That's all so nice of you to say!

S: No need to be embarrassed! You deserve all the praise you get from the world!

Au: Can I ask something?

L: Eh? What is it?

S: It's so rude to ask questions in the middle of singing someone's praises. What is it?

Au: Well, I was wondering if the fact that Subordinate S wasn't listed as a character in this scene under the "Afterword" heading, that weird-looking controller in your hand, and those strange electrode things sticking out of S's head had anything to do with each other.

L: ...

Au: ...

L: Erk! *Click*.

S: Hahaha. What in the wORLD are you talkING about? There's noTHIng untoWARD going oN here. PuREly your imaGInation.

Au: What is he, a robot? Ah! Or did you alter his brain?!

L: Wh-What are you talking about?! *Fiddle, fiddle. Click, click.*

S: What rude things to say to L-sama! *Grab!*

Au: Hey! Did you input some kind of command? Let me go! And what's with that syringe?!

L: Oh, um, you know. Nothing to worry about.

Au: I'm definitely worried! Erk...

[The sounds of surgery.]

L: Now, then. It's been a long and hard struggle, but that's the end of the novels.

Au (now with electrodes): Gosh, but the fact that the *Slayers* novels and short stories have lasted this long is surely thanks to all the readers who supported us, and L-sama, who took over these afterwords. Thank you so much.

L: I know this is what I wanted, but it's still creepy having the author suck up to me... Maybe I'll turn his thoughts back to normal mode.

Au: Ah!!! What did you do to me?!

L: Oh, nothing. Not a thing. Anyway, go on and wrap up the afterword.

Au: R-Right. This is the end of the *Slayers* novels. As for what happens to Lina and Gourry after this... I haven't really decided yet. The games, TV shows, and comics are all treated as parallel part 3 stories, but there could be different futures for them as well. I wanted to finish the story in an open-ended way to give you lots of room to imagine. Now, readers, allow me to thank you for sticking with me all this way.

S: But as long as the *Slayers* short story afterwords continue, L-sama will never be far away!

L: So we hope you'll continue picking up short story collections with titles like *Select* and *Smash*.

Au: You get it. At any rate, I hope we meet again someday.

Afterword: Over.

Slayers 15

THE DEMON SLAYERS!



**"What are you doing, Lina?! Struggle!
Panic! Where the heck are we?!"**

**"Calm down, Gourry.
We're in another dimension."**

"...Where?!"



**“Do you even
understand
the implications
of what you
just asked?”**

“Yeah... I do.”



Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

Welp, here we are at the end—of part 2, at least. I want to go ahead and clear the air just in case anyone's confused. This volume *was* the end of the *Slayers* novels proper when it was originally written, but fortunately for us, the author has since picked up the mainline story again. So we've got more ahead of us!

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, to give people an idea, since there'll probably be a time dilation effect for any of our readers going from this volume to the more recently published volume 16... this volume came out in the year 2000. I don't recall if I mentioned this back in my origin story in volume 1, but that means it's older than my translation career.

[Meg/ED]

Likewise! And volume 16 didn't come out until 2018, so *Slayers* fans spent nearly twenty years regarding this as the finale.

[Liz/TL]

That's why, among other things, I expect we got the cameo from the two final generals as "receptionists" there at the end. Just a last little Easter egg to canonize those designs.

[Meg/ED]

I quite enjoyed that. It was also fun to see Xellos again. And Rubia!

[Liz/TL]

A final Xellos cameo didn't surprise me too much. Rubia's reappearance definitely did! That may be because her role is so diminished in the anime, but that's all the more reason why it was nice to check back in on her here.

[Meg/ED]

It's not a throwaway appearance either. She has one of the strongest lines in the book (that "never forget" number Lina harks back to in the final showdown with Luke). It'd be easy enough to reduce her role in this storyline to a reminder that Luke had other options, other ways to handle his loss, but I really enjoyed getting her take. She *isn't* over what happened to her. She never really will be. It felt like a very frank and genuine look at what living with grief is like.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, and I really like that touch. I understand why the popular thing to do in movies and shows is, like, to have a grieving character give their life in a final moment of redemption or a final noble sacrifice and then find peace. It's clean, it's easy, it's dramatically satisfying. But I treasure those moments in a narrative when we can see someone living with their grief or their guilt and having to work towards redemption or wholeness or just plain survival. And it foreshadows for Lina that after what happens in this volume, that's what it's going to be with her. Just surviving. Continuing to live each day. Thankfully she has Gourry with her.

[Meg/ED]

I hope their grape-tasting tour is phenomenal.

[Liz/TL]

Well, actually— No, I'm not going to spoil the mood with foreshadowing again! It was a nice ending for them, and ending what they thought would be the series on another will they/won't they (you be the judge!) tease was another thing that felt appropriate.

[Meg/ED]

It's also kind of a fun throwback. Lina considers paying Zephilia a visit all the way back in volume 2, and we're finally getting back around to that.

[Liz/TL]

True. There's a lot here that seems designed to come full-circle, especially if you consider volume 2 to be the "real" first volume, with volume 1 (the one written for the contest) being kind of a prologue. Of course, we do get that full-circle with volume 1 as well...

[Meg/ED]

Indeed. I've noticed a pattern to my comments on the part 2 volumes along the lines of, "Oh, wow, this sucks—but I totally should have seen it coming because of X, Y, or Z." And there's quite a lot of that going on here in the finale as well, but that's not to say it was predictable. Far from it, actually. I think it was a thoughtful culmination to the buildup we've gotten...

Even if it still sucks!!! I didn't want to lose Luke, but like Gourry says, who are we to argue with the decision he made for himself?

[Liz/TL]

I was about to say Luke's the kind of "self-sacrifice to achieve redemption" character I was describing above, but when I think about it, he's really not. He theoretically helps Lina defeat Shabranigdu, but you don't really get a sense of tragic nobility from it the way you arguably do when Rezo does kind of the same thing.

But still, you get that sort of link between the two Shabranigdu pieces, that the Dark Lord could be defeated by a human because of decisions made by the human hosts—and whatever other flaws humans have, they are capable of resisting the urge to want to take the world down with them. That's a trait we're told demons are more or less incapable of by nature. And that gives a ray of hope to the world, that as challenging and painful as it may be, Ceifeed's plan

to purify Shabranigdu through human reincarnations was a wisely chosen one.

[Meg/ED]

It's interesting to look at both incarnations side by side, and there's a lot to read into in both cases. There *is* something of a resigned nobility to Rezo that we catch a brief glimpse of via his true voice toward the end. Luke, meanwhile, we know pretty well after all the time we've spent with him, and I gotta say... just reading the change in his voice was deeply unsettling.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, sometimes as translator I can get inside my own head with things and I sort of lose the experience of what a sequence feels like to a reader, but after you do your edits, I read through it again and it frequently feels very fresh. This time, the changes in voice between when he's Luke and when he's Shabranigdu were very striking and, quite frankly, upsetting to me.

We discussed this during the editing process, but in Japanese there's a part deep in the fight sequence where he even switches briefly to the pronoun we typically translate as thee/thou in the spell chants and such. It might be implying he slips into chaos words? But it's just one sentence, so we decided not to render it that way in English as we thought it might just be confusing to a casual reader. Hopefully the change in tone comes through regardless, but in case it ever becomes a plot point at a later date, now anybody reading this knows that he does that.

[Meg/ED]

To nerd out for a second, I actually had a lot of fun thinking about the timeline of the *Slayers* universe and how language has probably evolved in the time since the Incarnation War, much less since the legendary fight between Ceipheed and Shabranigdu.

[Liz/TL]

Would you believe— No, I refuse to spoil the mood with foreshadowing again! This is supposed to be a cut-off point! Although... **stares blankly in the direction of volume 17**

Anyway! Since I translated all these volumes ahead before coming back to clean up and pass the scripts on to you, I did enjoy going through the second time and picking up on all the bits and pieces of foreshadowing for Luke that actually exist in earlier volumes. There's a lot of stuff that I sort of dismissed as "oh, he's that kind of character" on a first pass that hits differently when you know where this is going, so I really do recommend anyone who didn't know about the twist here to reread the arc and pick up on those pieces. Luke's past as an assassin, his brushes with nihilism, his absurd spellcasting level, even the goofy bit about his natural hair color being red... oh, and of course the author's afterword regarding the meaning of "Presages of Incarnation" a few books back.

[Meg/ED]

Pity those of us who thought Luke and Mileena were afterthoughts when they first showed up, huh?

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I also recommend revisiting the storyline if you're one of those people (like me!) who couldn't initially get past thinking of them as Zelgadis/Amelia stand-ins on a first readthrough. Once you know where this is going, you know the storyline just wouldn't make sense with them, and you can appreciate it on its own merits.

[Meg/ED]

We speculated a bit at the beginning of part 2 about what an anime adaptation would've been like, and I think we quickly came to the conclusion that it would have taken a lot—and I mean a *lot*—of gutting to shape it into an ultimately lighthearted romp. I want to double down on that now that we've seen the full arc, because you can't take the hurt out of it. Pain, in all sorts of

ways, is the centerpiece of part 2.

Luke tells us in his last words that he just couldn't let go of his hate, but I think it's so, so important that's not where this story ends. There's a quiet moment for Lina to reflect on what it means to keep going in life, and that only has gravitas because she's looked tragedy square in the eye several times at this point. It's a... grounded sort of hope, I suppose.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, and I think that's where Rubia's presence in the book is important once again. Earlier I said, "thankfully Lina has Gourry with her" to help her keep going, but I should amend that... because while it's wonderful to have people in your life that help you ride through pain, a fact of life is that not everybody has that, and that's okay too. Rubia's on her own, but she's surviving nevertheless. She's living her life with her grief, and she's going to keep on going, finding the small pleasures, making delicious tea, raising her plants, and enjoying her (apparently extremely exceptional) greenhouse.

[Meg/ED]

Ah, yes, the modern marvel of the greenhouse. What a hilarious thing to throw in this volume. It would've been comedy gold animated too.

[Liz/TL]

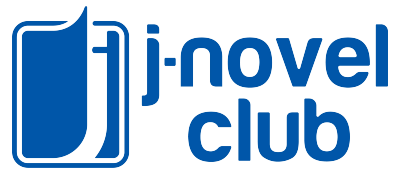
The complete surreality of that sequence in the middle of everything else that happens in this book just puts a smile on my face, thinking back on it. Never stop being you, *Slayers* novels!

[Meg/ED]

And as we carry these lessons into the future, I can't wait to see what wonderful weirdness we happen upon next.

[Liz/TL]

Whatever it is, we'll face it together, partner.



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Slayers: Volume 15

by Hajime Kanzaka

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Illustrations by Rui Araizumi SLAYERS Vol. 15

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022

Premium E-Book